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WORLD UNDER SNOW

Also by D. K. Broster

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A FIRE OF DRIFTWOOD
ALMOND, WILD ALMOND
And with G. W. Taylor

CHANTEMERLE
THE VISION SPLENDID

WORLD UNDER SNOW

BY

D. K. BROSTER & G. FORESTER



WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
LONDON :: TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED 1935

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS, KINGSWOOD, SURREY**

*All the characters in this book
are entirely imaginary.*

PROLOGUE

"FUNNY, this fog coming on so sudden-like!" thought David Jenner, as he slid into his bag the meagre harvest gathered from the little red letter-box attached, like a parasitic growth, to the telegraph pole. "Not had one as thick as this for a long time."

The bare Cotswold uplands, more prone to mist than one unfamiliar with them would imagine, were swathed this evening in a damp whitish blanket, the edges of which were trailing down into the nooks and valleys where the villages hide away from the austerity of the wolds. A corner of the blanket had just settled itself on the valley road along which the postman had been riding, and as he was on the point of leaving even this road and mounting up a lane, he knew that he was not likely to get clear of it.

"'Pon me word," he reflected, looking at his bicycle, propped against the telegraph pole, "if I didn't know me way as well as I do, I dunno as I could get on up there to High Charton." Even the light of his bicycle lamp (for it was about half-past five on a day at the end of January) failed to make much impression on the murk, perhaps because it was an old-fashioned oil one. Whistling "Daisy Bell" under his breath he opened it, and coaxed the wick up a little higher.

As he dealt with it his slow, honest mind reverted to the matter which for the past ten days had been teasing it. Jenner would not have admitted in words that he was worried . . . not what you might call really worried . . . by the receipt of that letter—more "put about-like." He

had only done his duty on the occasion to which the letter referred in such unpleasant terms; the step he had taken then had been as much his duty as, later on, going over the top in Flanders had been. Both were supremely disagreeable necessities, but the Passchendaele business, for instance, though it might have cost him his life—as it had poor Captain Severn—had probably not left a grudge against him in the mind of any of those Fritzes . . . at least not against him personally. It was different with this civilian trouble at home before the war. The chap should have let bygones be bygones, instead of writing to him in that silly blood and thunder way . . . and him once in the Force, too! It was true that the letter wasn't in his writing, but that was because it was all written in imitation printing, and, though there was no name to it, it was quite clear who it was from. A good thing that he had managed to pop it into the kitchen fire before Polly could get a sight of it, even though she had seen him do it and wanted to know what he was at. After it was burnt he had wondered whether he oughtn't to have taken it to the police, but a pretty fool he would have looked showing that stuff to fat Fred Pinder, the constable!

The lamp, encouraged, made a slightly improved if still muffled attack on its surroundings, but so little real help did it afford that the middle-aged Mercury decided not to mount his bicycle again, but to proceed on his feet. Pushing his machine, he crossed the road and set off up the lane which at this point stretched away from it in a northerly direction.

This lane, at first fairly level, rose afterwards a good deal more steeply, since it had to address itself to the uplands. Had there been daylight and no fog it could have been seen that it changed character as well as level

rather rapidly, for the hedgerow trees which shaded its entrance soon ceased, and the hedges themselves came shortly to an end, that on the left dwindling to nothing and that on the right sweeping away, after a while, round the field of which it was the boundary. Neither was replaced by the familiar dry-stone wall of the Cotswolds, a ditch on either side alone separating the lane from the great fields through which it ran, and which, on the left hand, rose swelling above it. But very little of all this was visible this evening.

However, whether because he naturally knew every step of the way, or because the bicycle somehow served the purpose of a blind man's dog, the postman plodded safely on in the middle of the lane without accident, in the middle too of the eerie silence which the fog had brought about. Even in a very quiet country-side there are always sounds, which in fact carry all the further because of the stillness, the barking of a distant dog, the ejaculations of poultry, the cries of children. But the mist this evening seemed to have killed all these; it seemed, most miraculous of all, to have cut off the intermittent motor traffic of the road which the postman had just left—though this, since the road was only a secondary one, was never very great. But it did occur to David Jenner, as he momentarily increased his distance from the highway, that no hooting or acceleration had been audible for quite a while, nothing, in fact, since the chug-chugging of a motor-bicycle some moments before he had emptied the letter-box; and that too, he had not heard since. He was blamed if he had ever known the place so quiet! He could hear nothing but his own trudging footsteps and the slight squeak of the bicycle saddle where his hand rested upon it.

No, he could hear something else! It was—or wasn't

CHAPTER ONE

THE Bentley's bonnet cut through the chilly January air with the steady swiftness which marked the progress of any car when Folyat's hand was on the wheel. Hilary Severn, sitting beside him in the sports coupé, meditated upon his friend's driving—so individual, so different from other people's—incidentally so much better. By the speedometer one knew the usually rather excessive pace which he always seemed capable of keeping up; yet one was never conscious of it otherwise, and he never appeared to take risks, or failed in the courtesies of the road. Hilary sometimes told him that he ought to be a racing motorist, though anyone less likely to take to that or indeed to any mechanised form of sport it was difficult to imagine. Denzil Folyat, an accomplished mountaineer, fencer and rackets player preferred more personally active occupations.

Yet this nice conduct of a fast car was of a piece with all his other characteristics—his faculty of swift decision, his incisive judgments, his impatient charm. A close friend since boyhood—they were both now in the early thirties—Hilary knew the man beside him so well that it seldom occurred to him to sum him up. But this afternoon, as they sped along the road to High Wycombe, he looked reflectively once or twice at the keen, rather arrogant profile beside him.

And for a good reason. Their long undisturbed relations to each other were on the point of suffering an inevitable change. Folyat, for whom women had never seemed to

possess much attraction (though he was attractive enough to them) had just become engaged, and this Saturday afternoon was taking Hilary down to Buckinghamshire to introduce him to Miss Chloe Page.

The introduction had to take place at the week end, for Hilary was not, like his friend, a man of leisure; he was on the Civil side at the War Office, whereas Folyat, with a good income and even better prospects—for he was heir to a rich unmarried uncle, whom he professed to find the most impossible bore on earth, and whose society he certainly did not cultivate—had no need to toil. But it was not in him to be idle, and he put his wide culture and literary ability to use in various ways, most of them critical.

They had passed Beaconsfield when Hilary suddenly enquired, "Whom are we likely to see this afternoon besides Miss Page and the General?"

"Nobody, I hope," replied Folyat. "As I told you, Chloe's mother is dead, and she is an only child."

"Then you didn't have to run the gauntlet of a whole lot of relations—though I suppose Miss Page has some?"

"Not many: a widowed aunt, Lady Monckton, in Hans Place—she has inspected me; and another aunt, her sister, plus an uncle, in Torquay. These I have not met. They have children—some married daughters and, unfortunately, a pestilential son who inhabits London."

"And whom, I gather, you *have* met," said Hilary smiling.

"I have indeed," replied Denzil Folyat, his mouth tightening. "Now what the devil is that lorry up to?"

In any case the question was hardly formulated before the lorry was a thing of the past, and they were running through the shallow, green, disfigured valley and the long drawn out suburbanity of the approach to High Wycombe.

Presently they were through the little twisted town, strung, with its old market-hall, like something once of price on an inferior thread; and then after another mile of bricks and mortar came to the parting of the ways at the foot of the mausoleum-crowned hill, and took the direct Oxford road.

Lincott Manor, Chloe Page's home, some half-mile from the highway, had woods about it, a wide view, a staid Georgian appearance, and a pillared portico in front of which another car was standing.

"Hallo!" said Folyat as he drew up. "Visitors! I wonder who? I hope they are not staying."

The butler ushered them into a large drawing-room, where the tall eighteenth-century windows cast a glow of light on to the pale gold hair of a slim girl in green, standing there with a man, at sight of whom Folyat's brows drew blackly together. "Curse!" he said below his breath. And the frown had not disappeared when the girl came forward to greet him and Hilary.

Hilary's instant guess at the identity of this visitor was verified when, after his own presentation to Miss Chloe Page (who smiled at him delightfully, and expressed much pleasure in making his acquaintance at last) he found himself being introduced by her to "my cousin, Mr. Milburn," obviously that very kinsman whom Denzil for some reason found so objectionable. He was a well-groomed, sleek-haired man of forty or so, with an expressionless face, but expressive eyes. Why, wondered Hilary, did Denzil dislike him so—for the curtness with which he greeted Mr. Milburn would alone have apprised anyone of that fact. Folyat, though he was capable of the coldest self-command, could rarely bring himself to suffer fools—or foes—gladly. And this cousin had probably been

a rival, though Denzil had not said so. Anyhow it seemed not unlikely that he was the cause of something about Miss Page which even Hilary, a stranger, could not avoid noticing. Indeed his friend's very charming-looking fiancée appeared to be what his sister Rosalind would have called "upset." Could the "pestilential" cousin have been making love to her so soon after her engagement?

At any rate Miss Chloe Page, upset or no, was very attractive, though not exactly the sort of girl whom Hilary would have pictured captivating the critical, sophisticated Denzil. Her dress, her shingled hair were quite up-to-date, but she had none of the hard allure of most of the damsels whom Hilary was accustomed to meet, who all, however young, seemed to aim at the effect of having exhausted every possible experience. None of that cultivated weariness showed in Chloe Page, with her fresh and candid expression, her eyes of a periwinkle blue, her ash-gold hair, only very slightly waved, and her engaging mouth. She looked almost a child, but it was obvious from her manner that she was not; she was indeed, Hilary reminded himself, the mistress of this rather imposing mansion.

"Father will be in quite soon," she announced, seating herself behind the grand silver tea equipage, which, flanked by all kinds of hot scones, cakes and sandwiches, had arrived in the charge of the immensely dignified butler. "He was so sorry that he had to be out when you arrived. How do you like your tea, Mr. Severn? Denzil, I think there are some rather choice sandwiches over there."

Even if her pretty blue eyes did look a trifle red about the lids—itsself a noteworthy phenomenon, for did the modern girl ever really cry?—Hilary could tell that she had quite recovered her composure. But the three men sat round balancing their Spode teacups with a certain

constraint. Denzil was the only one who talked without apparent effort, but Hilary, who knew him so well, was aware that his amiability was only surface, and that underneath he was seriously annoyed at finding this Milburn cousin here—annoyed perhaps even with his betrothed.

It was really rather a relief when General Page appeared, handsome and upright, a fitting figure for the master of a house such as this, who happened also to be a soldier. After a while Hilary knew himself to be in the presence of a man of the world as well. Appearing delighted to see Folyat, he expressed himself very much pleased at making Mr. Severn's acquaintance. It soon came out also that General Page remembered a brother officer of his, a Captain Geoffrey Fortescue, marrying a very pretty girl of Hilary's rather unusual surname. Could that have been any relation of his?

"My sister, sir," answered Hilary. "She is a widow now. My brother-in-law died about eight years ago, and I live with her and her boy in London." And before long he was amused to perceive that, unless he was greatly mistaken, he had undergone a rise in General Page's estimation as the result of this connection in the female line with his old regiment.

Tea over, the General intimated (with a half glance at his daughter, as though asking approval of his strategy) that as "Claude" was here, he would be glad if he would come with him into his study and give his opinion on the plans for the further alteration of the old stables. He even carried tact so far as to ask Hilary whether he would care to come and smoke a cigar with them too, but Chloe very quickly and firmly vetoed this second withdrawal, saying that Mr. Severn was to stay and talk to her, that he had

not been brought all the way from London in order to look at architects' plans.

"No, you are right, my dear; it was to look at something much prettier," said her father gallantly. "Come along then, Claude."

The moment the door had shut upon the two, Folyat went over to his fiancée. "Why did you have that fellow here, Chloe?" Hilary heard him ask in rather frigid tones.

"I really couldn't help his coming to-day, Denzil," the girl answered, the scarlet leaping up under her delicate skin. "I didn't know of it beforehand. He looked in on his way to Gloucestershire, where he is going to stay for the hunting."

"Looked in on his way to Gloucestershire? But what had he been saying to you just before we came?"

Hilary began to wish that Miss Page had allowed her father to carry him off; he was certainly *de trop* here. He moved still further away and affected to examine a largish, heathery water-colour of some mountain slope, presumably in Scotland. To his relief the butler then came in to take out the tea things, and whether that question of Folyat's was answered or no under cover of their removal, the fact remained that, after the process was finished, Denzil made no more enquiries in that tone of voice. Indeed, the three of them, sitting comfortably by the fire, Chloe caressing a large and condescending toast-coloured Persian cat, were soon chatting together in a manner free from strain. And as the moments went on, a Denzil quite new to Hilary began to emerge, more gentle and less dominating, and by this phenomenon Hilary could gauge how real must be his attachment to this girl with the happy eyes and mouth. It augured well for the future.

He was sorry when the door opened and the General appeared once more, because it would presumably mean that Denzil would freeze back into hostility at the re-entry of the cousin. But no cousin was there.

"Claude had to rush off, Chloe; it was later than he thought, and he wants to get down to the Jervises by dinner time. So he asked me to make his farewells and apologies."

"Oh yes, I quite understand," said Miss Page easily, and it was obvious to Hilary that she felt the unceremonious departure of the third guest as a relief rather than as a slight, while he was almost sure that he heard Denzil murmur, "Thank God!"

After that there was more conversation for a while though not of quite the same character as before the General's entrance. And at last Folyat rose, saying that it was time they started back.

"What, with a car like yours!" exclaimed the General. "I wish I could afford a Rolls-Bentley! When are we going to see you again, my dear fellow?"

"I am not absolutely sure," replied his prospective son-in-law. "I have to go to Ely on Monday about the rather involved affairs of an old great-aunt of mine there. She has just died, and I have the misfortune to be her executor. I don't quite know how long I shall have to be there—several days I expect. But directly I get back . . ." He did not finish, but his glance went to Chloe, and he smiled. He had a charming smile when he liked and—also when he liked—one which was not charming.

"I hope the old lady has left you something, Folyat?" remarked the General as they went together to the drawing-room door.

"Yes, an extraordinarily repulsive plated object, which

is, I believe, called an *épergne*. I wonder if any museum would accept it?"

"But, Denzil," struck in Chloe Page's soft, fresh voice, "I'd love to have an *épergne* in the middle of our dining-room table. It would be so Victorian! I've heard of them but never seen one."

"That accounts for your singular desire," retorted her betrothed. "But it shall not go ungratified. Don't come outside, Chloe—nor you, General, please. Remember that it's still January."

The butler, already in the hall, opened the door and the light streamed out through the pillars of the portico on to Folyat's car at a little distance from the steps. The two young men took farewell of their host and his daughter, and the latter said to Hilary, a trifle shyly, when Folyat had gone down to the car, "I am so glad to have met you, Mr. Severn! I hope we shall be friends!"

"As far as depends upon me, Miss Page, I am sure we shall," returned Hilary cordially as he shook hands.

Turning away he saw that the butler was proceeding down the steps as though to open the door of the Bentley for its owner; but Folyat was already in the driver's seat on the further side, and had started the engine. Yet the butler made no attempt to open the near door for Hilary but went round the car and spoke to Folyat through the window. Hilary got in, Folyat switched on the head lights, they both looked round for a moment at the two figures in the open hall door, then they were off, the glare lending a strange theatrical unreality to the grass borders and shrubs of the drive as it swept over them.

"Denzil," said Hilary impulsively as the car slid through the gate and turned Londonwards, "she's charming—quite charming! I do congratulate you."

"Thank you," said his friend unemotionally—yet Hilary was aware that he was sincerely pleased. "I knew you would be able to appreciate her. Chloe is not the kind of girl one meets every day."

"Indeed she is not! That is what is so attractive in her."

"The curious thing," said Folyat in a low voice, "is what she can have found attractive in me. I'm sure I don't know."

"Don't you?" said Hilary smiling in the darkness. That the unimpressible and usually far from humble Denzil Folyat was sincerely in love there could be no doubt. But a sudden curiosity moved him to leave the subject of Chloe Page for another.

"What did that majestic butler of General Page's want with you? I couldn't make out why he was processing round the car like that?"

"He came to give me a note which that insufferable fellow Milburn had left for me."

"Milburn leave you a note! What for?"

"God knows! I haven't looked at it yet—don't know that I shall—detestable hypocrite and meddler!"


"He seems definitely unpopular with you!" murmured Hilary, lighting a cigarette, and wondering what was his exact degree of popularity with his cousin Chloe.

They were through High Wycombe and up the hill beyond when Folyat suddenly slowed down. "I might as well read his damned letter now as wait." Pulling in to the side of the road and stopping, he switched on the dashboard light and brought an envelope out of his pocket.

Hilary looked out of his window. In the cold January heavens the stars were already sparkling. Terrestrial stars sped meanwhile—not so quietly—past the Bentley along the road to London. A minute had not passed like this

when Hilary heard a savage exclamation, and turned to see Folyat, his face strange and livid in the light from below, tear the note into the smallest shreds. Without a word he flung them out of the window at his elbow, snatched off the brake, let in the clutch with a jerk most unusual with him, and in a couple of minutes the Bentley was tearing along the dark road, crowded with Saturday evening traffic, at seventy miles an hour. They roared through the wide street of Beaconsfield with scarcely a diminution of speed; they overtook strings of other cars where it seemed that nothing but a miracle would get them through in time; the lights of oncoming cars flashed for a second only over the grim profile behind the wheel and were gone; the pace was terrific. Never in Hilary's knowledge of him had Denzil Folyat driven as he drove that night back to London, and Hilary himself, though he offered no remonstrance, was sincerely thankful when the lights of Uxbridge came in sight and the narrow slanting bridge forced this Mazeppa-like career to come to an end. And then Folyat spoke for the first time.

"Sorry, old man," he said curtly. "But I haven't smashed you up—and I won't now. The tramlines will restrain me."



CHAPTER TWO

(1)

ON the following Thursday evening Hilary Severn, liberated from the War Office, was splashing his way from Gloucester Road station, over pavements running with filth, towards the little front garden and shallow green Regency verandah of his sister's modest house in Ormiston Place. Having let himself in, he proceeded to wipe his boots on the mat with especial care; and for this precaution was rewarded by the commendation of Mrs. Fortescue herself, who happened to come out of the drawing-room at that very moment.

"Good boy!" she exclaimed (for she was fifteen years older than he). "I wish Quentin would remember to do that! Is it very horrid out?"

"Quite beastly," replied her brother. "Snow in London—or rather what it turns to—is the limit! Like the evening paper? I've read it. The weather has been much worse in the country than here."

He held out to her the *Evening Standard*, where "WORST SNOWFALL OF THE YEAR—LONDONERS WAKE TO A WHITE WORLD" shared the pride of place with "DARING JEWEL ROBBERY AT OXFORD" and "ANOTHER FRENCH CABINET CRISIS IMPENDING." In exchange Rosalind Fortescue drew his attention to a letter waiting for him on the hall table, which had come by the second post. It was from Folyat—a short note written from Ely the day before, to say that he would be finished with his great-aunt's testamentary

affairs by Friday, and hoped to be back in London in time to dine with him on that evening as arranged.

Hilary went off to change his wet boots, and then retired into his own little den behind the dining-room, expecting there to suffer a certain period of chill before the electric heater really got going. Somewhat to his surprise he found a good coal fire in the grate, and, flat on the floor in front of it, his elbows surrounded by lessonbooks and exercise paper, his ten-year-old nephew Quentin, freckles and all.

"Oh, Uncle Hilary, I hope you don't mind? But it was so cold in the dining-room after tea that Mother had this fire lit, and said she was sure you wouldn't mind my being here till you came in, if I didn't touch anything. I'm just going." Glowing in the firelight, his reddish head bobbed about as he began to collect the paraphernalia of his toil.

"You can stop here," returned his uncle, "as long as you keep quiet and don't object if I should want to use you as a footstool. As a matter of fact I must sit at the table and write a letter or two first."

"I say, that's awfully decent of you, Uncle Hilary," murmured the student gratefully. "I'll be perfectly quiet."

Hilary sat down at his table, and automatically changed the day and date on his revolving calendar to Thursday, February 2nd. It was getting on for a week since Folyat had driven him down to Lincott Manor. During the intervening days he had often thought of that visit, and thought of it under two main heads—first, Miss Chloe Page, whose image remained particularly vivid, second, that communication of Mr. Claude Milburn's which had roused such fury in its recipient as to make him hurtle the Bentley back to London in the manner of a genuine, if accomplished, road hog. He wondered whether he would ever be told what was in that note; he could not ask.

Intimate as they were, Denzil and he, even to the extent of dining together every fortnight when they were both in London, there were recesses in his friend into which one did not penetrate unless invited . . . which in fact one rarely was. But that was all right; Hilary himself disliked the idea of sharing every experience after the fashion which he imagined to be pre-eminently feminine—though his sister Rosalind, once questioned on the point, said that she never remembered taking part in one of those nocturnal hair-brushing séances dear to the novelist. And he was prepared now for some loosening of the links which bound him to Folyat; his marriage—even his engagement—must inevitably have some effect on their relations.

Yet he gave an involuntary sigh as he turned his attention to his correspondence.

"Let me just stay up for the news, Mother!" begged Quentin, as the hands of the drawing-room clock neared nine. And though Rosalind Fortescue, knitting a silk jumper by the fire, murmured, "I expect your uncle has read it all in the evening paper," Hilary, deep in *Two Adventurers on the Amazon*, made no protest, and the boy switched on the portable wireless. A fresh and amiable presence entered the room.

"This is the National Programme from London. Before the news there is a police message. At 8.45 p.m. on Tuesday the 31st of January, at the junction of Chiswick High Road and Goldhawk Road, a pedal cyclist was knocked down by a private motor car and has since died of his injuries. Will any person . . ."

Mrs. Fortescue shook her head sadly.

"Weather forecast for to-night and to-morrow. A deep depression off Iceland . . . another . . . filling up . . .

Winds will be . . . In North and North-Eastern districts and in the Midlands snow——”

“More snow?” groaned Hilary, coming abruptly out of the warm, the over-warm Amazonian jungles.

“London,” proceeded the voice encouragingly, “has come off comparatively lightly in the recent snowstorms which have swept the North of England, the Peak District and the Cotswolds—while other parts of the country have almost entirely escaped. In the North some villages are completely cut off, and the visitation has been very severe in the Cotswolds, where snow has been falling continuously since 11 a.m. yesterday, and, owing to the wind, has formed deep drifts. At the village of Charton-under-Wold anxiety is felt about the local postman, who has been missing since last night, and it is feared he may have fallen into one of the drifts. Search-parties——”

“What’s that?” cried Hilary, leaping suddenly to his feet. “What place did he say? Dash it, why can’t one make the thing go back and repeat!”

Quentin upreared himself with equal vivacity from the floor near the wireless. “What is it you want repeated, Uncle Hilary?”

“The place in the Cotswolds where the postman—did you catch the name?”

“Yes, it was Charton-under-Wold, where you go to fish sometimes. . . . Oh, and isn’t it the *postman* you stay with there?” His tone was rich with anticipation.

“The postman at Charton!” now exclaimed Rosalind Fortescue. “Why that’s Jenner, poor Francis’s Jenner!”

“Yes, it is,” answered her brother. “Good God, it would really be dreadful if anything had happened to him! Look here, Rosalind, I must find out about this. I shall go and telephone through to the Post Office at Charton—if the

lines are not down." And he dashed out of the room, followed by his deeply thrilled nephew.

Rosalind Fortescue, faded but still pretty, sat with her hands in her lap thinking of her brother Francis, killed sixteen years ago at Passchendaele, where the Hertfordshires had been so cut up. It was Jenner, his batman, who, at great and unregarded risk to himself, had brought in his body. Hilary was only seventeen then. Had he been a little older he might not be alive now—even as her own husband was not. But Major Fortescue had died a more protracted death than Francis Severn, for it was not till seven years after the Armistice that his lungs, rotted with poison gas, had finally given out, and Rosalind knew that to Quentin it was his uncle, fallen on the field of battle, who was the hero, rather than the father he could not remember.

Meanwhile the wireless set was reeling out the latest instalment of the Disarmament Conference serial. But news, shipping forecast and a brief talk by "Mr. Philipson Digby who has come to the microphone to tell you about the recent archaeological discoveries in Dalmatia," were finished before Hilary and his satellite returned.

"I had a good deal of difficulty in getting through," he reported. "It's true, I'm sorry to say—David Jenner *is* missing. It's just possible that he is weatherbound up in some outlying cottage, of course. . . . It seems it is still snowing down there. The postmistress has promised to ring up to-morrow if he is found. I have sent a message through her to Mrs. Jenner."

"Aren't sheep sometimes dug out of snowdrifts, after days and days, alive, Uncle Hilary?"

"Quentin," said his mother, "you ought to have been in bed half an hour ago. Off with you!"

"You won't hear any more to-night, I suppose, Uncle?"

"I don't think so. Cut along now!" And Hilary went over and put a stop to the strains of *Finlandia*, which were just beginning to fill the room with not inappropriate music.

"I'm really very much worried," he said, in response to his sister's look. "Yet it's extraordinary for a man who knows every step of every road round both the Chartons to stumble into a drift!"

"It's high ground, I suppose, where the drifts would be?"

"The snow is thick, the postmistress tells me, in both Chartons, Lower and High . . . High Charton is of course the more exposed. Well, I can't do anything, worse luck; but I am sorry for poor Mrs. Jenner to night."

And though he tried to resume his place in the canoe on the Amazonian tributary with its parrots and its piranhas, Hilary kept seeing the tranquil stretches of a very different river—the Windrush, and upon its bank himself, pipe in mouth, rod in hand, wondering how many trout he should take back to Mrs. Jenner. Jenner never would eat them. . . . Really, if anything had happened to that sterling chap, he did not believe that he could ever bear to stay at Charton again.

(II)

"I thought we might try the Vouvray they've recently got hold of here, Denzil," said Hilary. "It seemed to me rather good."

The waiter at the *Panier d'Oranges*, the Soho restaurant where Hilary was entertaining his friend next evening (for it was his turn to be host at the fortnightly dinner) had just tendered him the wine list.

"Vouvray . . ." said Folyat slowly.

"Don't you like it—let's have something else then," said Hilary, thinking he detected a note of criticism. "I know it's not a wine which is supposed to carry well, and you must have drunk it, I know, in better condition in France. Choose something else!" He held out the wine list.

"No, no, I should like the Vouvray. It will bring back Touraine." A reminiscent look softened for a moment the rather austere lines of Folyat's face. "At its best, Vouvray is delicious."

Denzil Folyat knew France well; he knew a great deal of Europe well, and not only the more mountainous portions where he went climbing. For Touraine he had a special affection, as Hilary knew.

"Well, how did you get on at Ely?" asked the latter. "I've always wanted to see the Cathedral. But I suppose you had no time for anything but your duties as your great-aunt's executor."

"No, I was immersed in them like a wasp in marmalade."

"How many nights were you there?—Idiotic question!—four of course, as you went on a Monday and came back on a Friday!"

Denzil Folyat held up the pale topaz in his glass to the light. "If you had been at Cambridge, Hilary, you would undoubtedly have been Senior Wrangler, so correct are your computations!—I'm off again to-morrow, by the way, but not to Ely—to Lincott Manor for the week-end." ("Of course," said Hilary to himself.) "But Chloe is probably coming up to London on a visit to her aunt, Lady Monckton, in about ten days or a fortnight, while the General goes to Bath."

"That's good news! I hope you will give Rosalind the opportunity of meeting her?"

"I will bring her to call with the greatest pleasure. This Vouvray is really good, Hilary—the best I have drunk in England, I think. What have *you* been up to since I saw you last? I thought as you came in that you looked a trifle worried. Is anything wrong with the nation's defences?"

Hilary sighed. "You're uncommonly observant, Denzil. No, it's not my work; I have had some rather distressing news. I am sure you have heard me speak of my friend David Jenner, who was once Francis's batman—and brought in his dead body after Passchendaele? (I always stay with him and his wife when I go fishing in the Windrush.) Well, in this recent severe snowstorm in the Cotswolds the poor chap has disappeared, and there seems little doubt that he has somehow fallen into a drift as he went his rounds. He has been missing since Wednesday evening."

"I am very sorry to hear it," responded Folyat sympathetically. "But what do you mean by his 'rounds'? Was he a milkman?"

"No, a postman—the postman of Charton-under-Wold."

His friend looked surprised. "A postman!" he repeated slowly. Fingering his chin, he appeared to digest this information. "But surely a postman, of all people, who knows every road and is out in all weathers . . . Where exactly is Charton-under-Wold?"

"On the river Windrush, not far from Burford."

Folyat took a long draught of the Vouvray and wiped his mouth carefully. "Near Burford," he said reflectively. "I have never quite taken in where it is that you fish in the Cotswolds—a piece of country which always sounds to me so unconnected with that sport."

"No, why should you? You have never set foot in that

part of the world, I think you once told me."

"I did. It's absolutely *terra incognita* to me. Thanks, yes, I will." He helped himself to another glass of wine. "Of course, a good deal of that district must be very much exposed . . . at least so I imagine."

"It is; though actually the village of Charton itself is not. But the postman has to go to outlying farms up on the high wolds. It must have been up there at High Charton, as it is called, that he met with disaster—if he has."

"Yes, one would imagine that it would be on high ground," said Folyat thoughtfully. "Burford is in Oxfordshire, isn't it, so I suppose that Charton is too?"

"Yes, but only just; it's almost on the border of Gloucestershire."

"How did you hear this news, by the way?" asked his friend.

"On the wireless last night. I managed subsequently to get through a call to the post-office at Charton, and they rang me up in the middle of the morning to say that Jenner was still missing. Rosalind telephoned the message on to me at the War Office. I am afraid there is now no hope of his being alive—and he was *such* a good chap!"

"My dear fellow, I'm sorry, very sorry! But it's no good worrying—unfortunately. He may have lost his memory, you know, and wandered away." Denzil Folyat produced his cigarette case and held it out. "Have you been to see the French pictures at Burlington House?"

"No, not yet," said Hilary, accepting a cigarette. "Do you really think, Denzil, that it may after all be only a case of lost memory? But even so Jenner may have met with an accident."

"How can I possibly express an opinion worth listening to?" asked Folyat, with a touch of impatience. "I don't

know the unfortunate man, nor his circumstances. But that sort of thing appears to be on the increase, and our psychological pundits often ascribe it to 'an unhappy home life'. You say Jenner was married?"

"Yes, but most happily. Mrs. Jenner, I hear, is in a terrible state, so much so that I mean to take leave to-morrow morning and run down to Charton myself to see if there's anything I can do for her."

Folyat, about to light his cigarette, paused and looked at Hilary with an expression of unmitigated disapproval. "Go down to Charton—*you!* What good can you do there—act the St. Bernard dog? My dear Hilary, there's a limit to the expression of sympathy." The match, its function unfulfilled, dropped with a hiss into his plate. "Don't be absurd!"

"It may be absurd, but I am going all the same," retorted Hilary, faintly nettled, accustomed though he was to discount his friend's sometimes over-forcible language. "You see I have known and respected Mrs. Jenner as well as her husband for years, and she always took so much trouble to make me comfortable when I went there."

"She'll hardly do that this time, I imagine," said Folyat rather brutally. "Waiter, for God's sake set that fan going, can't you—it's like the tropics in here!"

"Yes, it is hot," agreed Hilary. "I'm sorry. Let's have our coffee quickly and get out. It's cold enough outside!"

"Too cold!" said Folyat. He gave a little simulated shiver. "An Alpine thaw is one thing, a London thaw another. But it's I who should apologise," he added, with his sudden charming smile, "for criticising the atmosphere of your chosen hostelry. Ah, that's better!" He leant back and shut his eyes for a moment as the revolving blades above them sent down some air which had at least the

merit of being in motion. "I'm writing a long notice of that new edition of Rémy de Gourmont for the *Revue Internationale* and I must finish it to-night, as I am going down to Buckinghamshire to-morrow, so I ought to be getting back soon to St. James's Street. Have you ever read anything of de Gourmont's, Hilary?"

Hilary had not, but he listened with interest while, over coffee and liqueurs, Denzil discoursed for a little rather brilliantly on that author. They parted without any further reference being made to Hilary's projected expedition.

CHAPTER THREE

“**H**is body was found about nine o'clock this morning, sir, so we've just heard, in a snowdrift in the lane that runs from Crutchley's Corner at Staneley. I'm as sorry as if it had been a relation of my own, Mr. Severn, I am indeed. He was a real good sort, was David Jenner, for all he wasn't a Cotswold man born.”

Thus the station-master, standing with Hilary's suitcase in his hand, on the platform of the station which, at more than three miles of distance, served Charton-under-Wold, and other villages. Evidence of the sudden thaw now in progress was universal; water dripped copiously from every projection, and a porter with a coal shovel was scraping away noisily in front of the booking-office. But overhead there stretched a clear blue sky, and the crisp air (for the thaw was not of the muggy variety) filled London lungs with a sense of physical exhilaration.

“I was afraid that was what I should hear, sooner or later,” said Hilary sadly, as he turned towards the exit and the car which the “Trout Inn” at Charton had sent in response to his wire. It had indeed been his fear, yet until this moment he had cherished a hope that the worst had not befallen that ‘real good sort.’ And now, as he climbed into the ancient, side-screened Morris, he was vaguely ashamed of his present feeling of extra bodily well-being. The weather to which it was due had killed that excellent fellow to whom he had been joined by a double bond, of gratitude on his dead brother's behalf, and of real friendship on his own. Mingled, too, with his

genuine sorrow was an undeniable dread of the coming interview with poor Mrs. Jenner, which of course, if she wished to see him, he could not shirk.

As the tyres of the elderly car scrunched over still unmelted snow in the roadway, Hilary reviewed what he knew of the dead postman's past. Jenner, as the station-master had said, was not a native of the Cotswolds; he came from Winridge in Hertfordshire. He had got the job of postman at Charton under-Wold soon after demobilisation, partly through the influence of his former colonel. Hilary, having come, some years later, upon the tracks of the man who had brought in his brother Francis's body at Passchendaele, had visited Charton in order to have a talk with him, and had thus discovered the piscatorial charms of the Windrush, and the simple comforts of Stream Cottage; for by that time David Jenner was married to a Charton woman, with whom he was very happy. . . . Now all this had come to a tragic end.

At the "Trout," when Hilary arrived there, Mr. Tebbutt, the landlord, was full of the finding of the body, though, evidently to his regret, he had not been one of those who had dug it out. Outside, however, were several of the men who had, and Hilary obtained without difficulty a fairly vivid impression of the discovery. It had been supposed that, if Jenner had succumbed to the cold or fallen into a drift, as from his continued absence seemed at last fatally certain, the accident must have taken place on the upper levels of his round, near the group of exposed farmhouses known as High Charton. Various search-parties, including one from these farms themselves, informed by telephone, had done what they could the previous day without result, but no one had thought of

prosecuting any search so near the highroad as in Crutchley's Lane. Yet it was there, engulfed in a drift, that the postman had been found that morning by a farm labourer coming down from High Charton; and even he would have passed that heaped white mound had not the thaw revealed something dark protruding through its sinking surface, which proved to be the unfortunate man's shoulder. The labourer had hastened to the village for assistance, and after some shovelling aside of the snow there was revealed the body of David Jenner, mailbag and all, lying upon his face.

Sick at heart, Hilary re-entered the "Trout" with Mr. Tebbutt. He found the tragedy difficult to realise, and even more difficult to account for. Jenner had been postman of Charton for close on fourteen years; he must have known every step of the way, and he must also have experienced worse weather than this recent snowstorm, notably in the severe winter of 1928-9. And why had the fatality occurred in a comparatively sheltered lane? Up on the exposed wolds, swept by blizzards, it would have been more comprehensible.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Tebbutt, shaking his head, "it do seem strange, as you say, that the poor chap should come by his end in Crutchley's Lane. He must 'a been feeling the cold badly that day, though, because earlier in the afternoon Tom Chapman—you know, sir, him as has that sort of bungalow place with hens—well, it seems that he was outside feeding 'em, and saw Jenner passing in the snow and thought he looked a bit done up, and asked him in to have a drop of something—'twas only currant wine—to keep the cruel cold out. And he said Jenner seemed the better for it. Jenner can't 'a been quite the thing, else he'd never 'a took it when on duty, it being

against regulations, it seems, and him always so particular, poor chap!"

"You don't think that the wine——"

"Oh no, sir! Jenner was almost teetotal, as you know."

"That's just why. He wouldn't be used to it, and those home-made wines are often pretty heady," explained Hilary, remembering a visit to a Cotswold farm and the effects of a highly fermented rhubarb brew of which he had been induced to partake.

"He took very little, sir, Chapman says, and I've tasted that stuff of Mrs. Chapman's myself. 'Twouldn't make a fly crawl crooked—a waste," added the innkeeper with some contempt, "of fruit that would 'a been better in a pie!"

From the "Trout" Hilary went to call on Dr. Harding, the energetic little local practitioner, and had the luck to find him in.

"I put it down to heart failure," he said. "You must have noticed in the papers lately, Severn, two or three cases of elderly men succumbing in the streets in this recent cold weather. Jenner's heart was none too sound."

"Wasn't it? I had no idea of that! Did he know it himself?"

"Not till I discovered it when I examined him for rheumatism last November. The trouble was not then very serious, but I warned him not to over exert himself, on his bicycle for instance. I don't think he really believed me, for I never saw him spare himself in consequence."

"Do you mean," asked Hilary, "that he had a heart attack which seized him just on the edge of a drift—I presume he wasn't bicycling that night?"

"No, there was too much snow for that. Yes, I do mean that he had a syncope, fell face downwards and never

recovered consciousness. Quite a merciful death!"

"But what disastrous ill luck that the attack should come upon him near a drift. If he had collapsed in the middle of the lane where the snow was not so deep . . ."

"He would still have died, my dear Severn, unless he had been found pretty soon. The cold would have finished him."

"The snowdrift didn't actually suffocate him then?" enquired Hilary with a slight shudder.

"That depends on what you mean by suffocation. There was nothing violent about it, and I believe that he was quite unconscious. . . . Do you want to see the poor chap?"

"Why, where is he?"

"Here in my garage. The inquest will probably be on Monday—I don't think there'll have to be a post mortem, but if there is that will be a convenient place. I'm stowing my car elsewhere, of course."

Hilary hesitated. He felt that it was cowardly of him, but he would so much rather remember David Jenner as he used to see him in his off hours working in his little garden, or going on his rounds in the postman's uniform which he somehow contrived to wear with the air of an old soldier . . . "I think I'd rather not," he said finally, getting up to leave.

"Very well," said Dr. Harding. "And I'm expecting every moment a call to a confinement . . . the other end of the cycle."

"I suppose," said Hilary on the front door step, "that the drift deepened during Wednesday night. I wonder how deep it was when he fell in?"

"Deep enough," said Dr. Harding. "Deep enough for a grave. 'Not so wide as a door nor so deep as a'—what is it that fellow Mercutio says—'but 'twill serve!' As a

matter of fact two inches of snow would have been enough, as he fell face downwards."

This information and the scrap of misquotation which preceded it did nothing to console Hilary, and, seeing this in his face, Dr. Harding added, "But, remember, he can't have known anything about it. Personally I'd be glad to have so easy a death. . . . Ah, there's the telephone."

Going down the village street between the dwindling shovelled up snow heaps, Hilary became aware of feet hurrying after him, and, turning, beheld the figure of Mr. Porter, the Vicar, who was bearded as the proverbial pard—a black pard, too.

"It is Mr. Severn, is it not?" asked the very soft, high voice which issued so surprisingly from that ebony thicket. "I heard you had come from London on account of this sad business about poor Jenner. Dreadful, dreadful! It is good of you to have come, Mr. Severn, very good. I am sure Mrs. Jenner will greatly appreciate it."

"I couldn't do anything else," said Hilary, "though, to tell the truth, I am rather dreading meeting her."

"She is quite prostrated," said the Vicar, "and I fear a trifle hysterical into the bargain, making rather wild statements, poor soul—I might almost call them accusations."

"Accusations!" exclaimed Hilary. "Against whom, and about what?"

"I shouldn't take any notice of them when you see her," counselled the Vicar, not answering this question. "She feels it very much that her husband's body was not brought home to Stream Cottage. But owing to the exigencies of the inquest and the possibility—the bare possibility—of a post mortem examination, it is lying in Dr. Harding's garage. I wish very much," he added, turning his eyes in the direction of the church tower, "that we had a little

mortuary chapel attached to St. Lawrence's. We very nearly had the money for one given to us after the death of old Mrs. Jervis of Staneley Court. Her son said that he was going to give it in her memory; but alas, though people are often disposed to charitable deeds by the visitation of death the impulse does not always last . . . and so we still have nowhere suitable on these sad occasions—since we could not have a coffin in the church over Sunday. Not of course, really," admitted the Vicar with a sigh, "that the villagers wouldn't rather use their own best parlours. Still, a garage does seem . . . and Jenner, you know, was a regular church-goer."

"And died, too, in the performance of his duty," added Hilary—and instantly thought, with the curious false shame of an Englishman, how horribly sententious the words seemed directly they were out of his mouth. And yet they were absolutely true.

"Have you seen the spot where the poor fellow met his death?" next enquired the Vicar.

"No, not yet. I was thinking of walking out to Crutchley's Lane now," replied Hilary. "I'd better raise an electric torch first though, in case it is dark before I get back."

"Walking! Nonsense, my dear Severn; your London boots, I am sure, are quite unsuitable for a four-mile tramp in half-melted snow. Besides, it *will* be dark. I'll take you there myself now in my sister's pony cart; it's up the street there outside the grocer's. Briggs, our gardener, was driving me, but we will not take him with us. Come along now, there's no time to lose, and Eunice told me that if I saw you I was to bring you in to tea."

Hilary, trapped, saw that there was no chance of avoiding that *démodé* form of conveyance, Miss Eunice Porter's

governess cart. He had known the tub-like and ludicrous vehicle for years, and had always hoped that he would never be called upon to endure what it promised of cramp to the knees, jolting to the frame, and general uncertainty as to the shaggy black pony's reaction to motor traffic. To this was now to be added doubt as to Mr. Porter's control of the pony in question, for his fate was upon him; and in a few minutes, feeling more than a trifle ridiculous, he was sitting sideways in the little brown wooden box on wheels with the Vicar in command of the reins.

They left the village, passed along a winding lane with hedges still white-shrouded, and emerged on to the road—not, however, the real main road, which ran along the top of a higher ridge. Here the reverend charioteer, looking like an Assyrian king in disguise, by voice, agitation of the reins and even application of the nearly lashless whip, goaded the fat and hairy pony into a spasmodic canter which imparted an almost cross-Channel motion to the receptacle behind it.

"You see," observed Mr. Porter a little breathlessly, suddenly clutching at his hat, "that our steed, if not exactly a Derby winner, has excellent paces when he chooses. . . . Gently, gently now—" as the animal thus commended even showed signs of playfulness. "Ah, here comes a motor lorry, too. I must somewhat restrain him, since he has an aversion to them for which, to tell the truth, I do not blame him. Whoa, whoa, Tommy, foolish beast, it will not hurt you!"

The lorry thundered past, the brown churned up snow-slush from its wheels spattering impartially the reined-in Tommy, the governess cart and the upper portion of its driver. "Never mind," said the latter good-humouredly, "our good Bucephalus did not put us in the ditch, which

on a day like this would have been particularly unpleasant. We have only about half a mile more now to the beginning of Crutchley's Lane, where the poor fellow was found."

After this they jogged on in comparative silence and safety, until the Vicar, indicating with his whip a little red blob on a telegraph post, remarked, "There's the letterbox where poor Jenner made his last collection at half-past five last Wednesday. Alas, he did not carry it far."

"The bag was found with him, I understand?"

"Yes, and it has been taken to the post office. The letters it contained are, I gather, little the worse, and will no doubt be delivered in due course."

They turned off the road, the pony, his friskiness evaporated, proceeding sedately under the still snow-laden but dripping elms at the beginning of the lane; indeed the snow, less melted here than elsewhere, rather impeded his progress. Tracks of a good many feet preceded his on the white expanse, but they went no further than the spot, some three hundred yards up, where a group of people, men, women and children too, whose voices had already come to them in the stillness, stood looking down at a tumbled heap of spade-marked snow at the side of the lane.

"That's where he was found," explained the Vicar somewhat unnecessarily.

"What, there?" asked Hilary. "Yes, I see that that is the side which has most of the drift."

"Owing to the north-east wind. Shall we get out here? Dear me, Mrs. Pinder has brought both her little boys! She really ought not to have done that!"

The Reverend Mr. Porter opened the door at the rear, and Hilary, emerging from the wheeled box, walked slowly towards the group.

The snow had not only heaped itself against the barrier formed by the higher fields on this side, but it had, naturally, filled the ditch between them and the lane also. The almost continuous drift, shrunk though it might be, was therefore much deeper than it appeared. Hilary stood staring at it, while the Vicar put forward theories of how Jenner had come to be so near the side of the lane when he had stumbled and fallen. It struck the young man that, given one unbroken covering of snow over lane, ditch and fields alike, there would have been nothing to mark the confines of the lane that night. Now, with the thaw, and all the trampling of feet, these were apparent enough. But he did not press the point—what was the use? Overtaken by some spasm of the heart, Jenner *had* stumbled and fallen there, and no amount of attempted reconstruction of the tragedy, or calculation of the amount of snow already lying there on Wednesday night, and of what had fallen since, would bring back to life that excellent, hardworking, cheerful fellow who had tramped past this future burial-place of his so many times in all weathers.

Nor had Hilary any wish to linger there, watched by that throng of villagers, though the group had fallen back as he and the Vicar approached. Only the old shepherd, superannuated now, stood by them leaning on his stick, murmuring something about going to sleep, and the snow being that warm and comfortable; and Hilary remembered hearing that the old man himself had once been overcome in the snow during the lambing season. But *he* had been found in time. . . .

So Hilary soon moved away and addressed himself to the task of turning the pony, and the Vicar almost immediately joined him. Conversation about the tragedy was

impeded on the return journey by the presence of Mrs. Pinder's little boys, shy, silent and running at the nose, whom the Vicar, after reproving their mother for bringing them all that way, insisted on conveying back in the governess cart.

In the Vicarage drawing-room Miss Eunice Porter, on whose shapely head the black hair so like her brother's was plentifully tempered with grey, received Hilary with the unbending severity which she invariably showed. But Hilary had long got over the uncomfortable feeling that she especially disapproved of him—even though he knew that she considered fishing a waste of time—because she seemed to disapprove of everybody.

"The whole of Charton and Staneley, I am afraid," she said as she poured out the tea, "will be disorganised by this unfortunate occurrence." Her tone almost suggested that the late postman was badly to blame for allowing himself to perish. "I suppose, Endymion, that you found a whole posse of villagers staring at the place where the body was discovered."

"I am afraid we did," replied her brother as he passed Hilary his cup. The Reverend Mr. Porter really did bear the Christian as well as the family name of that Caroline loyalist, himself a Cotswold man, from whom he and his sister claimed descent.

"It seems almost a pity that you and Mr. Severn added to their number," pursued Miss Eunice. "It must have savoured of encouraging the extraordinary and morbid interest in the scene of a tragedy which is so prevalent nowadays. We shall have charabancs going there next."

"That, my dear Eunice," protested the Vicar, smiling a little in his raven beard, "is highly unlikely. And it was

only natural that Mr. Severn, who has come all the way from London . . .”

Hilary did not listen to the end of the sentence. The firelight, the home-made scones, the silver teapot, the fat liver and white spaniel on the rug, the whole warm and comfortable atmosphere of the Vicarage drawing-room seemed to be either unreal themselves, or to make unreal that snowy lane—he did not know which.

A moment later he found Miss Porter fixing him with a clear and unrelenting eye.

“I hope, Mr. Severn, that when you see Mrs. Jenner you may be able to persuade her to control herself a little better. She has apparently been saying some very regrettable things, attributing her husband’s death to malice on the part of some unknown person—so my brother and Mrs. Spragg both tell me.”

“You have not seen her yourself, Miss Porter?”

“No; she refused to admit me, but Endymion saw her for a few minutes. He found her very——”

“Very overstrained, not unnaturally,” completed the Vicar.

“Very unrestrained, I should rather call it,” amended Miss Eunice firmly.

The Vicar was more charitable. “She has been through a great deal, poor woman, since Wednesday night,” he observed. “This delusion that poor Jenner had an enemy wicked enough to push him into a snowdrift will, I hope, pass as the first effects of the shock wear off. They were a very devoted couple.”

“When you see her, Mr. Severn,” counselled Miss Porter, “I should refuse to hear a word from her on the subject of this imaginary ‘enemy.’ It can do her no good.”

“On the contrary, my dear,” said her brother, “I think, if

you will forgive my differing from you, that it may be a good thing for her to have the relief of pouring it out. The principle which lies at the bottom of psycho-analysis, you know."

"Psycho-rubbish," muttered Miss Eunice.

"I expect," remarked Hilary with a slightly sinking heart, "that I shall not have much choice in the matter. If she wishes to talk on that subject, I cannot refuse to listen."

"When are you going to Stream Cottage?"

"When I leave here, sir. If she doesn't feel equal to seeing me this evening, then I will go any time she wishes to-morrow. I can stay till the 7.42 train if necessary."

"You are a real Christian, Mr. Severn!" observed the Vicar appreciatively.

"Oh no, indeed, sir!" protested Hilary, quite shocked. "No, indeed I'm not! Only, having known poor Jenner for so many years, and remembering my brother Francis . . ."

"You mustn't let Mrs. Jenner trade upon your good nature, Mr. Severn," interrupted Miss Porter, with very great firmness. "As a man, Mr. Severn, and a young man, you are naturally not armed with the experience of her class and its failings which life in a country village brings to an elderly woman in my position."

After which incontrovertible truth there seemed nothing to be said.

CHAPTER FOUR

MISS PORTER's dictum rang without comfort in Hilary's mind as he stood in the dark—and for the last time perhaps—in the latticed porch of the Jenners' cottage and lifted the knocker. No light showed from any of its windows, as from other cottages along the Windrush, whose usual murmur the melted snow of its tributary brooks had swollen almost to a roar. Perhaps Mrs. Jenner was out at a neighbour's. He was ashamed at the relief which sprang up instantly in his mind at this conjecture. But, as in humanity bound, he knocked once more; and this time he heard lagging feet come to the door.

It opened to the customary illumination provided by the tiny blue glass oil-lamp on a bracket, and to the terribly transformed face of Mary Jenner, once so round and cheerful.

"Oh, Mr. Hilary, is it you? Come in—yes, indeed, sir, I want to see you—yes, now, this evening. Come in here to the fire, please."

She stood back for him to enter, not the sitting-room he used to occupy when he stayed there, but the Jenners' own living-room, always spotless and cosy, though she did her cooking there.

"Sit down, my dear," she said gently—she had never called him that before. "And you have come all the way from London in this dreadful weather on purpose? Eh, Jenner would have appreciated that—he'd have said it was like you—the sort of thing Mr. Francis would have done too. I do take it kind of you, sir!"

She was so gentle, so controlled, so full of his kindness, that Hilary was somehow more alarmed than if she had been in the state represented to him at the Vicarage. "It isn't anything, Mrs. Jenner," he said uncomfortably. "You know how fond I was of your husband—how deeply I sympathise with you in this terrible business. It is a real personal loss to me, Mrs. Jenner—I do assure you of that!"

"Then, Mr. Hilary," said she, raising her reddened eyes to him out of a face drawn and puckered as if a frost had passed over its once cheerful contours, "then you can help me to find out who did it, who pushed or fooled him into that drift. For he never walked into it of his own free will, Jenner didn't. 'Tis not in nature that he could, not being blind, and knowing every step of the way, and where the ditches were, and where snow was like to lie thick with that wind. And it weren't snowing thick when he cleared Crutchley letter box—you know he did clear it, Mr. Hilary, because the 'next clearance' notice had been slipped in—and he'd been that road many a time in the snow and the dark . . ."

"But, Mrs. Jenner," interrupted Hilary, "don't you know that Jenner's heart was not very sound? Dr. Harding has just told me about it, and says he is sure that Jenner had a fainting fit which caused him to fall into the drift. It wasn't that he missed his way."

"A fainting fit!" said Mrs. Jenner incredulously, "Jenner never fainted in his life! No, no, sir, that's nonsense, and it's no good Dr. Harding pretending things like that to put me off. I'm going to find out who's responsible for my poor David being where he is now, in Dr. Harding's garage."

Hilary saw that he would have to take this baseless idea of foul play seriously for a moment or two. "Dear Mrs.

Jenner," he said, "let us sit down and discuss this quietly. Isn't it your great grief which has put this strange fancy into your head? But surely such a thought is really doing an injury to Jenner's memory—the dear old chap can't have had an enemy in the world."

Jenner's widow faced him in silence for a moment. Behind those pathetic eyes of hers flickered something which baffled the would-be comforter, and he knew that his way of putting the case had made no impression.

"Please to sit down, Mr. Hilary," she said formally, and seeing that he would not unless she did, she sat down upon the very edge of the other worn basket-work arm-chair. "You mean very well and kindly, sir, I know, putting it like that. Jenner can't ever have *deserved* an enemy, that's true; but he had one all the same, and I'm a-going to find out who it is, if it takes every penny of what Jenner and me had put by. I thought you might have advised me how to set about it, but I see as you only think I've got some crazy notion into my head, the same as Parson does. But I've never been one for fancies, no more than Jenner; we was just plain ordinary folk. . . . If you can't help me I don't know who will." A tear ran unregarded down her cheek; she began to pleat her apron in an endeavour to preserve her composure, and fixed her eyes in a forlorn way on the unresponsive black surface of the little kitchen range before which they sat.

Hilary felt desperately sorry for her. What could be clearer than that, despite her denial, she had got a baseless idea into her head? That being so, how could he or anyone else help her to pursue it? The greatest kindness would be to scotch it as quickly as possible, and the best way, obviously, to do this was to put before her again the truth about Jenner's weak heart. But ere he could start

on this topic, Mrs. Jenner suddenly stretched out her work-roughened hand and pointed to the small, glowing grate of the range, whose door was open to give more heat to the room.

"It was in that very grate that he burnt the letter, about a fortnight ago. If only I'd seen what was in it!"

"What letter, Mrs. Jenner?" asked Hilary, startled.

"I wish you could tell me that, sir! The letter, anyway, that David tore up and shoved in there when he thought I wasn't looking. He'd never done such a thing since we was married, nor me neither. We always showed our letters to each other when we got 'em, which wasn't often."

"So his doing that made you sus—made you think—" He did not quite know how to end the sentence.

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Jenner turning her eyes on him again, "what would you have thought? It showed me quite plain as he didn't want me to know who the letter was from, nor what was in it."

"Didn't you ask him at all?"

"Yes, Mr. Hilary; and he said, 'Nothing, Polly, 'twas only a circular, like. I just threw it in the fire because I know you can't bear litter about.' I didn't believe him, even then; but I said, 'Well, you might have let me have a look at it—what was the circular about?' And he said, 'Oh, just one of them cures for rheumatism.' But I'm dead certain it wasn't a circular or advertisement at all—it was notepaper with writing on it. And a circular wouldn't have worried him like that worried him; for days afterwards he wasn't quite himself, I could see that."

A passing surmise that the letter, if letter it was, might have been from some old flame visited Hilary, but he did not really give it more than a second's consideration. "Jenner did have rheumatism a bit, didn't he, poor chap?"

he suggested. "Don't you think the circular may have been one of those that try to get your money out of you by frightening you, telling you that if you don't take that particular remedy you will get all stiffened up in your joints, or something of the sort?"

"Mr. Hilary," retorted Mrs. Jenner reproachfully, "was my David a man to be scared by a silly advertisement of one of them patent medicines?"

"Well no, Mrs. Jenner," confessed Hilary, feeling slightly ashamed of his suggestion, "I can't truthfully say he was. You may be sure that I don't forget Passchendaele, and never shall. But do you mean that he was so worried after the receipt of this communication, whatever it was, as to seem . . . alarmed? Surely not?"

Mrs. Jenner's eyes were pitiful. "Not then, Mr. Hilary, he wasn't. Worried, he was, but not alarmed. But when he come home after his rounds the night we had the fog, Friday of last week that was, though he was all right when he came in, he told me in so many words that he had been scared. Ashamed of it, too, he was, and laughed at himself, and said a fog made you fancy things . . ."

"What sort of things?" asked Hilary quickly.

"He thought as there was someone following him that he couldn't see—footsteps, like, that stopped when he stopped and went on when he went on. He owned he'd got the wind up proper at the time, but soon he was making out that someone must have been playing a trick on him. But he didn't really think that, Mr. Hilary, and he wouldn't have thought there was footsteps following him or anything if he hadn't have had that letter from him a week or so before—the letter he threw in the fire here."

"*Him?* What him, Mrs. Jenner?"

"If I only knew, sir," replied Mrs. Jenner in a trembling

voice, her calm beginning to break up, "I shouldn't need to talk to anybody that thinks I've only got some queer notion in my head. I should go straight to the police. But all I've ever known—because try as I might for years I couldn't never get Jenner to tell me about it—was that there was some unpleasantness before ever I met him, before he left Winridge, you know, sir, where his mother had a shop and where he used to live before the War. There was a fuss of some sort there, and he made an enemy through doing his duty, that much I do know. But in the end I gave up asking him about it, because I knew he hadn't done nothing wrong or mean himself, because it weren't in him. And I think from what he let out once that the man that had a grudge against him left England and went for the colonies, so I hadn't never thought about the business at Winridge for years, till that 'circular' come, and Jenner came home talking about footsteps in the fog."

She broke off, twisting her apron hard now, while Hilary took in this sufficiently vague disclosure of some episode in the past history of his old friend of which he had never heard a whisper. But indeed why should he, when even Jenner's wife knew really nothing about it?

"By the way," he asked, "do you know whereabouts it was that he fancied he was being followed?"

Mrs. Jenner's mouth began to work uncontrollably. "It was . . . just about where he was found this morning . . . in Crutchley's Lane." And with that she turned, hiding her face against the faded cretonne of the chair-back, and burst into a flood of sobbing.

There was really nothing for Hilary to do next day at Charton, but he stayed on till the afternoon in case Mrs. Jenner wanted to see him again. He had been glad to

leave her the previous evening in the care of a neighbour, who was spending the nights at Stream Cottage. Soon after breakfast on Sunday this Mrs. Spragg came to the "Trout" asking for Mr. Severn, and told him that Mrs. Jenner had passed so bad a night that she had persuaded her to stay in bed till midday, when she, Mrs. Spragg, would cook her bit of dinner for her; and after that Mrs. Jenner would be glad to see Mr. Severn again if he could spare the time.

Hilary therefore attended Morning Prayer in the little Perpendicular church, built of the lovely honey-coloured stone of the neighbourhood, and listened to a sermon on the Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, delivered, not by the Reverend Endymion, whom one could easily visualise in a sou'wester, but by a bespectacled itinerant preacher of the Mission. The Vicar gave out a little notice about a highly esteemed parishioner who had recently met with a tragic death in the performance of his duties, and whose funeral would probably take place on Tuesday or Wednesday; and "Safe home, safe home in port" was sung amid a certain amount of sniffing from some members of the congregation, Hilary himself being conscious of a lump in the throat.

After lunch he went again to Stream Cottage and was admitted by Mrs. Spragg to the living-room where Mrs. Jenner was standing, more wan and changed than ever, in the black dress which she now wore—a temporary loan, no doubt, thought the young man, since it was too big for her. She stood with one hand on the blue and red checked tablecloth.

"I hear there is going to be an inquest on my poor husband," was her first remark. "But will it help to find out who murdered him, Mr. Hilary?"

She had brought the word out now; it accorded with

the light in her eyes. But her voice was desperately weary and dispirited.

"Mrs. Jenner," said her visitor gently, "you have seen Dr. Harding, I expect. Didn't he tell you what he thinks killed poor Jenner—not a person at all?"

"What do you mean, sir? Not that 'twas a spirit, a ghost? They frightens folk, but they don't push them into snowdrifts."

"Didn't Jenner ever complain about his heart to you, Mrs. Jenner? Didn't you ever hear him say that it troubled him."

"Never, sir. There was nothing wrong with it."

"But the doctor examined him last November and told him . . ."

She interrupted. "I think you're mistaken, Mr. Hilary. Jenner did go to Dr. Harding about his rheumatism some time ago, but not about his heart."

Then Jenner had not told her what the doctor had said, probably out of consideration. It was a pity, as things had fallen out.

"Well, as I told you yesterday, Dr. Harding seems sure that it was owing to his heart that he fainted and fell into the drift, poor chap," he said. "That is what I meant by 'what killed him.' And you can't really think that Dr. Harding would make up a thing like that."

He had not convinced her in the least, though she shifted her ground a little. "Wouldn't any person faint that was pushed into a great heap of snow till they were . . . were smothered?" Mrs. Jenner's voice shook violently, suddenly, on the word, and since that idea of suffocation—though without any malicious human agency—was what had haunted her hearer, he was silenced for a moment. Then he recovered himself and brought forward a new argument.

"But, Mrs. Jenner, if any person had attacked your husband, there would have been marks of a struggle on him, which the doctor would certainly have seen. Jenner wasn't the sort of man not to have put up a fight, and there would surely have been some evidence of that."

He paused, but as Mrs. Jenner remained stubbornly silent, he went on earnestly, "You really must not give way to these ideas! Don't think me unsympathetic for speaking so plainly, for you know how much I respected and liked your husband. If I believed you had any grounds whatever for this dreadful suspicion of foul play, I should be nearly as unhappy as you."


"I have the grounds, Mr. Hilary, and I've told you what they are."

Hilary considered for a moment. "Very well then, Mrs. Jenner, I think you should inform the police, and they will probably settle for you to give evidence at the inquest about the receipt of that letter."

"And about Jenner being followed—there's that too."

"Yes, and about Jenner thinking he was being followed. Then the matter can be taken up. You see," he explained gently, "I can't help you in that, because it was you who saw Jenner destroy the letter and you who thought he was worried, and it was you he told about thinking he heard footsteps that night; so it is you who must tell the police, and the coroner if necessary, even if you don't like doing it."

He had been excusing himself in her eyes for being unable to take anything upon himself in this matter. But Mrs. Jenner said, with a hard and almost fiery note in her usually gentle voice: "I shall be only too thankful if they'll listen to me, Mr. Hilary."



CHAPTER FIVE

THERE were two letters with the Charton postmark beside Hilary's plate on Tuesday morning. He read the Vicar's first.

Dear Mr. Severn,

Our regretted postman will be buried to-morrow. The verdict at the inquest, as I foresaw, was 'death by misadventure.' Little more than formal evidence of identification and of the finding of the body was called—and of course Dr. Harding's medical testimony. A post-mortem was not considered necessary. Poor Mrs. Jenner created or tried to create a scene, the purport of which you can imagine, but was suppressed.

Although I have not the slightest doubt that the verdict was correct, yet, if I might venture the merest simulacrum of a criticism, it is that the Coroner rather too obviously took it for granted. (He was sitting without a jury.) But then I am not a lawyer.

The effects of the snowstorm which has deprived us of so valued a public servant are no longer visible. My sister joins me in kind regards, and we both wish to thank you for your truly charitable journey hither last Saturday.

Sincerely yours,

Endymion Porter.

Dear Mr. Hilary, began Mrs. Jenner's black-edged and unpunctuated epistle.

I always thought that in our countrey there was good justice Jenner used to say so and not one for the Rich and

another for the poor but now I see it isn't so they brought in death by Missadventure as if it was my poor husbands fault him tumbling into the drift when the truth was he was pushed in but the police woudent listen to me nor the Corroner neither and what is more that Chapman at the bungalo gave Evidence as to how he gave Jenner a drink of current Wine to keep the cold out which is not true because it is against Regullations for a postman to take such on his Rounds and Chapman told a lie to Blacken my husband now he is Gone and have always wanted his place and being an exservice man himself he can apply for it though I dont say it was him pushed Jenner into the snow Oh Mr Hilary the world is a Cruel place only you coming down on purpose like that has kept my heart from Breaking
yours respectfully

Mary Jenner.

Hilary sighed, and passed both letters over to his sister behind the coffee pot.

"Uncle Hilary, is there anything new about the mystery—about who pushed Jenner into the snowdrift?" thereupon asked Quentin, who had kept one eye upon him as he read.

"Nobody pushed Jenner into the snowdrift," replied his uncle repressively, regretting that after his return on Sunday night he had, in an unguarded moment, spoken to Rosalind about Mrs. Jenner's suspicions when Quentin was in the room. "Get on with your breakfast, there's a good chap."

Foiled in his hope of learning details of one sensation Quentin proceeded to impart details of another.

"All right, but I want to tell you something first, Uncle. I expect you read in the paper last week about that American lady who had all her jewelry stolen in Oxford? It was

worth *millions* of pounds! Well, what do you think? If only it had happened in the hols Barclay major would have been there—he's a boarder at Mr. Silverthorne's but his home's in Oxford—and perhaps he might even have seen the burglars getting in—he's awfully sharp!"

"But how could he have seen them?" asked Hilary rather perfunctorily, his thoughts away in that sad little cottage by the Windrush.

"Because the house where the jewel lady was staying is next door to his home in Norham Gardens. A policeman even came there to ask if they had noticed anything suspicious. I bet Barclay major would have, if he'd been at home! Isn't it an awful pity he wasn't?"

"That depends on the point of view. If he is so gifted, the thieves were probably glad of his absence," replied his uncle, receiving back his correspondence from Rosalind.

"Poor Mrs. Jenner!" said the latter compassionately. "I am glad we sent the wreath off yesterday, Hilary."

A good many times during the remainder of that week did Hilary find his thoughts dwelling on David Jenner and his tragic end. He was glad he had made the journey down to Charton, even though his doing so had aroused Folyat's derision. But that Denzil's sharp tongue often belied his real sentiments, as Hilary knew quite well, was proved once more, when in the latter half of the week there arrived a brief letter from Lincott Manor to the effect that, having seen in the papers that Hilary's worst fears about his friend the postman were realised, he was writing to say how very sorry he was, and that he hoped Hilary had not thought him aggressively unsympathetic the other evening, when, as a matter of fact, the worst was not yet known.

Hilary had not gathered from what Denzil had said that he intended to make so long a stay at Lincott Manor, but it was quite easy to understand the attraction. And that the source of this attraction was coming to London in about a week's time Hilary himself found pleasant to contemplate.

Curiously enough, the memory of his own visit to the Manor was revived—though it scarcely needed it—by a very unexpected encounter which he had that Saturday, the day of the England *v.* Ireland Rugby match at Twickenham, which he attended in company with a War Office friend and Quentin, on whom, to his almost overwhelming joy, a spare ticket had been bestowed almost at the last moment.

Coming back from the match Hilary, separated from his friend at that place of sudden severances, Twickenham station, was borne on the human tide with Quentin into a carriage which was already over-full.

"I'll stand, Uncle Hilary, I'd like to, really!" said Quentin rather breathlessly, and Hilary observed that it was questionable whether he could even do that. However, the various bodies, to the number of sixteen, sorted themselves out somehow, and Hilary to his surprise found himself occupying a seat between two of them.

It was all very well going down to Twickenham for a big Rugby match, it was all right—very much all right for an enthusiast—when one was there watching England win, but getting away at the same time as 50,000 or so other people was the very devil! Hilary's youthful companion, however, did not seem to find it so; his round, heated face expressed nothing but gratification at the extreme compression to which, sandwiched between two large men, he was being subjected. But it was to Quentin such a glorious occasion that all its concomitants were glorious.

It was not long before Hilary began to suspect that Fate had thrust them into a slow train for Waterloo, and almost simultaneously the same horrid foreboding struck the man wedged next to him on his left, and he gave vent to it in a voice of unrestrained annoyance. Hilary, uncertain whether he were being personally addressed or no, agreed, and then realised that he had seen the speaker before, and that recently. A moment's searching of his memory, and he remembered where it was—at Lincott Manor a fortnight ago. His close, his very close neighbour was undoubtedly that Mr. Milburn, Miss Page's cousin, the man who had written Denzil the mysterious note which had so infuriated him.

Recognition dawned upon Mr. Claude Milburn at the same moment.

"We met at General Page's the other day, I think. Mr. Severn, isn't it?"

Hilary was not particularly anxious to talk to Mr. Milburn, nor the latter, he somehow felt, to him, but they were in such extremely close proximity that to have sat speechless after their mutual recognition would have been awkward and odd. And Quentin had become absorbed in a football discussion with the stout, publican-like individual to whose waistcoat he was pressed.

But the conversation, on the part both of Hilary and of Mr. Milburn, began in a guarded manner; and for guarded conversation the weather, in England at least, providing a safe and natural topic, it was not long before the two were speaking about the snowstorm of the previous week.

"I was staying with a friend at Staneley Court in Gloucestershire for the hunting," volunteered Miss Page's kinsman. "But first frost and then snow quite spoilt it, so we cleared out and came back to London."

"Staneley Court," observed Hilary with interest. "Oh, Major Jervis's. That's only two miles from Charton-under-Wold. No doubt you heard then of the fate of the unfortunate postman of Charton, whom I happen to have known for years. Or had you left before he was missing?"

Mr. Milburn turned his head and looked at him intently. He was already so close that this action was almost embarrassing.

"I left on the Wednesday afternoon, before the worst of the snow fell. No, I don't think he was missing then. I saw about it afterwards in the papers, but I'm afraid I didn't read the account very carefully. Fell into a drift or something, didn't he, poor fellow? Up on those exposed wolds at High Charton, I suppose it was?"

At that moment, before Hilary could correct this impression, the train lurched, and one of the standing passengers practically sat down upon Mr. Milburn, to his obvious annoyance and Quentin's ill-concealed delight. When he was released Mr. Milburn began a diatribe against the Southern Railway—though he had a first-class ticket he had been swept into this scandalously overcrowded third-class compartment! By the time he had ceased to effervesce it hardly seemed worth while correcting the misconception about poor Jenner; but during the rather perfunctory conversation on the match which followed, half Hilary's mind was speculating on the contents of that note to Folyat, and wondering whether the faint dislike which he felt for his fellow passenger was due merely to the fact that he knew Denzil detested him.

It was nine o'clock on the evening of the following Wednesday. Rosalind Fortescue laid down her work and looked across the drawing-room hearth at her brother.

The Times was lying on his knee, and he was staring with a bothered expression into the fire. Suddenly, as if aware that he was being observed, he looked up and caught her eye.

"Yes, I was studying you," confessed his sister. "I was thinking that you looked worried, dear boy. Are you?"

Hilary sighed; it was an acknowledgment. "It's poor old Jenner—or rather Mrs. Jenner. I can't get her face out of my mind. But, Rose, there *can't* be anything in it, can there?"

"In what? Oh, you mean this idea of hers about her husband being pushed into the drift? Well, having been down to Charton you should be better able to judge than I, my dear; but, broadly speaking, I should have thought that it was impossible. What motive could anyone have?"

"Well, you remember I told you that Mrs. Jenner had a tale of someone with a grudge—a long time previously; then there's the letter Jenner got (but no one knows what was in it) and the fact that he thought he had been followed. I can't think that Mrs. Jenner made up that statement. Yet the police don't seem to have paid any attention to her. Shall I run down to Charton again, and try to argue her out of the idea? . . . I don't know *what* I ought to do about it."

"I don't think," said Rosalind, resuming her knitting, "that there is really anything that you can do—nor, in fact, that there is any need for you to worry to the extent you seem to be doing."

"But I'm so dashed sorry for Mrs. Jenner! And she was always so good to me when I stayed there. If she can't be disabused of this idea of foul play I am almost afraid she may have a mental breakdown."

"Well, Hilary, rather than that *you* should have one I'd

say, do something! But as I have no idea what you could do . . .”

“I have it!” said her brother, sitting up. “I could try to find out what was this mysterious affair in which Jenner was once involved.”

“But how can you even start to, if, as I think you said, Mrs. Jenner herself doesn’t know anything definite about it?”

“I can’t think,” admitted Hilary with some despondency. “Advertise—no, what should I advertise *for*? And it’s such years ago! But I feel I’ve got to take some step . . . I think I’ll ring up Denzil, if he’s at home, and see if he has any ideas on the subject.”

“Even if he did jeer at me for going down to Charton,” he thought as he sat down at the writing-table in the dining-room and began to dial.

Denzil’s man answered him. Yes, Mr. Folyat was in; if he would hold the line . . .

Presently Hilary was aware that the receiver at the other end had been taken up.

“I say, Denzil, have I disturbed you?”

“You have, and earned my warmest thanks thereby. I’ve got the most devastating bore here. To what am I indebted for this blessed surcease?”

“Indirectly, to poor Jenner’s widow.”

“What did you say—something about a window? Has Quentin fallen out of one? But I expect he landed on his feet.”

Decidedly Denzil was welcoming the “surcease”!

“I said *widow*, by which I meant Mrs. Jenner—the postman’s wife at Charton-under-Wold, you know. Denzil, she has got a most unfortunate idea into her head about her husband’s death, and it’s bothering me. I know you

think I'm foolish, and I dare say I am, but let me tell you what it is—Are you listening?"

"Why shouldn't I be listening?" came Folyat's voice, with all the amusement gone out of it. But Hilary was prepared to be thought a bore. He plunged forthwith into the tale of Mrs. Jenner's suspicions and the alleged grounds for them, and the pathetic letter of last week which showed that she had not in the least accepted the verdict at the inquest.

When he had finished there was silence, a silence so prolonged that he wondered for a moment whether he had been cut off. When his friend's voice came through at last, the telephone, by one of its tricks, had given it the effect of greatly increased distance, almost of removal to another sphere.

"From the report of the inquest that I saw in the paper," it said, and it was cold but not, as Hilary half expected, impatient, "there seemed no grounds for any verdict but the one which was returned—'Death by misadventure'."

"No, and of course I don't believe in Mrs. Jenner's theory. I think it's crazy. And yet I feel I must do something about it."

"An unknown enemy," said the voice reflectively, "a letter of warning (presumably) and footsteps in the fog! Rather like rough notes for a film scenario, but distinctly intriguing."

"Too intriguing for me!" commented Hilary, rather wishing that Denzil would not be flippant. "Do you think there can possibly be anything in it?"

Another pause. "Counsel's opinion is, No," came at length. "But the opinion of one who knows Hilary Severn well, and that infernally active conscience of his, is that he had better look into the matter of the man with a grudge,

because, like the baby in the old Pears' Soap advertisement, he won't be happy till he—does."

"But if there's nothing in it, my dear chap, what's the good?"

"The good is, that by proving Mrs. Jenner's suspicions of foul play devoid of foundation, you will, presumably, be able to set them at rest once and for all, and induce her to acquiesce in the verdict."

"Of course!" said Hilary, cheered. "I hadn't looked at it quite in that light. It's perfectly absurd, to my way of thinking, to suppose that Jenner was pushed into that drift. At the same time it is clear that the only person who would, humanly speaking, have had any motive for pushing him, is this unknown with a 'grudge.' My first step, then, is to find out who he is, or was, and then where he hangs out now, if still alive."

"Clear and concise, my dear Hilary! The sooner you set about this quest the better, then."

"Yes, but how the devil *am* I to set about it?"

"Didn't you say that this enmity was incurred, according to his wife, at the place Jenner came from, before the war? If so it might be worth going to this spot—I suppose she knows where it is."

"I know myself; Winridge in Hertfordshire."

"Well, why not run out there some Saturday afternoon, and see if you can pick up any kind of trail. Even a negative result might reassure Mrs. Jenner."

"Very well; I can but try. I might start by enquiring for the man who bought Jenner's little shop in 1914. Heaven knows, though, I don't want to start business as an amateur sleuth! I shall be hopelessly bad at it. But I might go to Winridge, certainly—if that is really your advice."

"It is, for what it is worth," came the reply. "Oh, by the by, Hilary, I'm awfully sorry I shan't be able to give you dinner on Friday. I'm dining at Lady Monckton's that evening. Chloe is coming up to her to-morrow, you know."

"Oh, to-morrow, is it?—I quite understand about Friday, of course. Don't forget you're going to bring Miss Page to see Rosalind."

"Certainly I won't," said Folyat warmly. "Now I must return to my boon companion. For this relief, short as it has been, again much thanks. It will enable me to bear with more fortitude the discourse on the habits of puffins, which my bore was just approaching when you called me away."

"Puffins?"

"Yes. My guest is what is called a bird-lover, but he does not love them mutely, and he has just been on a visit to a bird sanctuary somewhere—and unfortunately came away again. Good night."

CHAPTER SIX

FROM the rather faded photograph which used to hang over the sofa at Stream Cottage Hilary had gained some impression of the shy, sleepy little Winridge of Jenner's day. Old Mrs. Jenner's small shop, with a crooked and delightfully bulging window, just showed in one corner, and Hilary could imagine the mixture of bulls'-eyes and bootlaces, oranges and blacking brushes which it had probably harboured.

He had heard Jenner mention the name of the man who had bought the shop on his mother's death, but had forgotten it; however he was pretty sure that when he saw it written up—for he believed that the shop had not changed hands a second time—he should remember it. This new proprietor, he fancied, had considerably enlarged the modest emporium and had, Jenner said, done remarkably well out of it. But Jenner himself, so he once told Hilary, had not revisited Winridge for years, because it no longer seemed to him the same place.

Yet Hilary had imagined that, when he alighted from the motor-coach at the point on the featureless arterial road nearest to Winridge, he would find that the village itself, being remote from a railway station, and, until recently, from any highway of importance, would be approached by a country lane. But the signpost arm directed him along the mere shell of one, "improved" out of all charm, with a tarmac surface, raw, sliced banks, and pink-roofed bungalows already sprouting up on the "desirable freehold building plots" which replaced its former careless fields.

And at the end of this corridor, instead of the modest little village of the photograph he found a vulgar townlet sitting crowned upon the grave thereof. Among these garages, teashops, cinemas, teashops again ("Ye Olde Oake Roome") he felt bewildered, and a little uncertain of finding old Mrs. Jenner's successor after all.

Then he suddenly perceived, in staring gilt letters across the façade of a particularly blatant-looking establishment, with an "island front" and any number of plate-glass windows, the announcement, "Hanson's Magnifico Stores" and, immediately below, a neon sign testifying to the public after nightfall that "Hanson Is As Hanson Does." It came to him at once that that was the name . . . and *this*, then, was the little fairy-tale shop of the photograph! And he stared a moment, dazed and melancholy, at the full-grown fruit which the sun of progress had ripened from that small and inoffensive bud.

Dodging two sports cars and a wireless service van, he crossed the street and proceeded to select the most suitable department of the Magnifico Stores in which to enquire for the proprietor. Eschewing the ladies' underclothing and the millinery he sought information in the mens' tailoring.

"Mr. Anson's never in the shop on Saturday afternoon," a youth informed him with an air at once casual and reproachful.

"Then where can I find him?"

"Dunno, I'm sure," said the youth, turning away to replace a bale of suiting.

Hilary, annoyed, left him at once for an older man who appeared to be doing sums, and from him obtained "the boss's address—'Bella Vista,' fifth house up Percy Road," with directions how to find Percy Road. "But I don't expect he'll be in."

It had already occurred to Hilary that Saturday afternoon was not a propitious time for his visit, yet, except Sunday, he himself had no other at his disposal. But outside "Bella Vista," which proved to be an ugly new house of purplish brick with a slate roof edged with red tiling, stood a mud-splashed Morris-Oxford car. Unless "Bella Vista" had a visitor, Mr. Hanson might be assumed to be at home.

Hilary wrote upon a visiting card, "On business connected with the late David Jenner," and, having ascertained that Mr. Hanson was in, asked for an interview, and gave it to the girl of fourteen or so who opened the door. Leaving him upon the doorstep, she carried his missive within.

In a moment or so appeared a stout, short, florid man of about fifty, wiping tea, presumably, from his moustache, and studying as he came Hilary's card. Then he lifted his eyes, perceived with a shopkeeper's acumen the class of visitor with whom he had to deal, and broke into apologies.

"Sorry the girl left you standing out here, sir—she's been told times and again not to do it, unless it was vacuum cleaners or water softeners. Please to step this way!" He ushered Hilary into the glaring outcome of the Magnifico Stores' furnishing department, and struck a match.

"We'll have this warm in a jiffy," he said as he stooped. "'Andy, these gas fires, aren't they? This is the newest kind. Won't you take a seat, sir?"

And when they had both sat down Mr. Hanson looked enquiringly at his visitor. "You've come about business in connection with poor old Dave Jenner, sir? I can tell you that affair shook me up, especially hearing about it first on the wireless too. You're a lawyer, perhaps, sir?"

"No," said Hilary, "just a friend. I got to know him——" and he told Mr. Hanson how, and of his own subsequent connection with him and Charton-under-Wold, to all of

which Mr. Hanson listened attentively. He looked the typical prosperous tradesman, but was evidently not so uplifted by his own success as to have lost touch with his fellow creatures, for when Hilary had finished he said, "Poor chap, poor chap!" with genuine feeling in his voice, and continued, "To think of him, as went right through the war, going west in a snow-storm at home! Might I ask without offence why you have put yourself to the trouble of coming 'ere, sir?"

"Certainly, Mr. Hanson. I came to ask you a question, as one who knew David Jenner here in the old days. I am only asking it in order to put to rest, if possible, a strange idea which his widow has got into her head. I want you to tell me whether, as far as you know, Jenner ever made an enemy of any sort?"

Mr. Hanson's eyes opened. "Enemy? No, Mr. Severn, I shouldn't think so. He wasn't one to make enemies, David Jenner wasn't."

"There wasn't some affair, then, just before he left here for good, in which, merely by doing his duty, as Mrs. Jenner puts it, he made an enemy of some man or other?"

"God bless my soul! Of course—the business of the pocket-book! Don't know how I forgot that, and me that was at the trial too, and heard the whole story from Dave Jenner as well. Yes, Mr. Severn, you might say he made an enemy over that; yes, certainly. But it's so long ago; it was in 1914 that it happened. Why does his wife . . . ?"

"If you'll be good enough to tell me the story, Mr. Hanson," said Hilary, "I'll explain why."

"Then do you mind if I smoke? And won't you light up too, sir? That's right."

He produced his pipe, while Hilary lit a cigarette, and in a moment or two had plunged into narrative. "Well,

Mr. Severn, Winridge was quite a small place in those days, as I dare say you know. Quite pretty it was in its way—very backward, of course, never heard of electric light or private telephones—with some of them old thatched cottages even, all roses and no drains. And what with that and the bit of wood there used to be quite near, on the opposite side—full of bluebells it was, I remember—it's all cleared now for building plots, which seems almost a pity, only of course there's a demand for eligible sites . . . as a matter of fact I've bought some myself, as a speculation. As I was saying, sir, there was enough in those days to attract people to come and picnic about Winridge, especially in the wood in spring.

"Well, in the spring of 1914 a party comes and picnics in the wood. I dunno how many nor anything about 'em except that one of them carried a deal of money on him, for he lost, or thought he lost, in that wood, a pocket-book with more than £50 in it, in £5 notes and sovereigns—it being in the days when we still had the little shiners. Now what was his name? Lew something or other. Lewis? No, Lewknor, that was it! Well, this Mr. Lewknor didn't find out his loss until he got home, which seems strange, don't it?—and then when he did find it out he wasn't sure whether the pocket-book hadn't been pinched from him in a crowd he'd been in somewhere or other earlier in the day. He came back to Winridge next day and hunted all over that part of the wood where the picnic had been, but couldn't find anything; so he informed the police and went away, thinking it was most likely that he had had the pocket-book stolen at the other place, wherever it was.

"There was no police station in Winridge then, only a constable. Garlock his name was, a pleasant enough chap, that got on well with everybody. Afterwards, of course,

several people said they'd had their doubts about him, for one reason or the other, but folks are like that, as I dare say you've found, Mr. Severn.

"It was in the spring that Mr. Lewknor lost his wallet. About June old Mrs. Jenner died, and Jenner he decided to give up the shop. His heart had never been in it; he'd only stuck to it for his mother's sake, to help her run it, and they'd really been losing money over it in the end. And I bought it—for very little, I'll admit, but not for less than it was really worth. I tried to keep to that motter of mine which I expect you've seen over the Magnifico even in those days—though it's true I hadn't thought of it then, nor what a lot of custom it was going to mean to me. Jenner was such a straight chap that he never attempted to hide from me that the shop wasn't much of a concern; besides, I could see that for myself. And he was glad to get out of it, wanted to go in for something more out-of-doors and thought of being a whole-time gardener instead of doing odd jobs in that line, as he had sometimes; and he was looking about for an opening when war broke out.

"But just a few days before that happened—I think it was on the very Saturday before that Bank Holiday in '14—Jenner was taking a walk in the wood, when what should his dog fetch out from a rabbit hole but the missing pocket-book, with just the amount in it Mr. Lewknor said, and his card too. So Jenner, honest chap, took it straight to P.C. Garlock for him to hand over to the Superintendent at Rainford where the nearest police station was. "Right you are," says Garlock, when he had asked him exactly where it was found, and all that sort of thing, and written it down, "right you are, I'll take it over as soon as I can. That Mr. Lewknor *will* be pleased, after all these months,

and there'll be a reward coming to you. But there's just one thing," he says. "I feel sure from what you tell me that Mr. Lewknor never dropped the pocket-book where you found it, in that rabbit hole. Someone's had it since and put it there till they think it's safe to change the notes" (because, of course, the numbers being known they had been stopped), "so we don't want whoever it is to know it's gone from the hiding-place, because he'll probably go and look for it, and with luck, we might cop him too. At least I think that's how the Superintendent will look at it, so don't breathe a word to anyone yet."

"Jenner promised this, and he wasn't one to break his word, as the constable knew; nor he wasn't by nature a talkative chap either. Afterwards, thinking it over, it did seem odd to him that if someone had already found the pocket-book they hadn't at least helped themselves to the three sovereigns in it, which of course couldn't be traced like the notes. However, by Monday he and everybody else in the place had got something else to think of, and by the end of that week he had enlisted in the Hertfordshires and was gone from Winridge."

"And what then, Mr. Hanson?"

Mr. Hanson knocked out his pipe. "Nothing happened for a bit, sir. Jenner was on Salisbury Plain or somewhere, being trained for a soldier. Then one day he got a registered letter from Garlock enclosing a sovereign and saying how pleased the gentleman was to get his money back, and that he had sent a pound for Jenner, which Garlock was to pass on to him, and Garlock was sending it in cash, instead of by postal or money order, because he didn't know what facilities Jenner had, where he was, for cashing such a thing. Jenner thought that very obliging, and wrote to Garlock, of course, and acknowledged the money.

"About a fortnight after this he was fair flabbergasted to see in the local weekly paper, which he used to have posted to him from Winridge to keep him in touch like with the old place, an advert. signed with the name of Lewknor offering a reward for a brown wallet containing £53 believed to have been lost in Winridge Wood on the 24th of April last."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the listener. "That meant then that the constable had never—but its inconceivable!"

Mr. Hanson nodded his head sagely. "I see you're like the most of us, sir, inclined to think our English bobbies can't do no wrong! But after all they're only yuman, aren't they, like the rest of us? And whether Garlock had planned this from the beginning, or whether it came to him, when Jenner cleared out so soon afterwards into the army, that no one would ever know the pocket-book was in his possession, I can't say. They couldn't get it out of him at his trial—the case went to the Assizes."

"But what made this Lewknor man suddenly advertise again after all those months?" asked Hilary in surprise.

"Because, Mr. Severn, the notes being stopped he thought he had given long enough for them to turn up if they had been stolen off him. As they hadn't, he went back to his first idea that he had lost them—as he had—in Winridge Wood."

"I see," said Hilary. "That advertisement must have put poor Jenner in a very difficult position. What did he do?"

"Wrote straight off to the Superintendent at Rainford and told him exactly what had happened. What made him so mad was Garlock sending him that 'reward,' which he did of course in case Jenner should make trouble by enquiring why he hadn't received one. But the poor chap felt it a sort of bribe, like. In fact that's just what Garlock

tried at the Assizes to make out that it was—'ush money. He pretended that Jenner, who of course was the chief witness against him, had really been an accomplice, and was to have had I forget how much of the whole amount, and that this pound was the first instalment. But of course he couldn't pull that story off, because for one thing if Jenner was as dishonest as that, why should he have handed over the whole amount to a policeman in the first instance—not being a loony? Besides, in the end nearly all the notes were found in Garlock's possession. I believe he had just started trying to get rid of them and had managed to cash one or two."

"He must have been furious with Jenner for coming forward and securing his conviction! What sentence did he get?" asked Hilary with really breathless interest. Was it possible that something concrete did lurk behind Mrs. Jenner's fantastic suspicion?

"Four years penal servitude, sir."

Hilary whistled. "That was pretty stiff! But of course he was a policeman, in a position of trust."

"Yes, sir; and it seems that he might have been given much more even. And naturally he was dismissed from the Force. So that pocket-book was the end of him. You may well say he was furious; there was no doubt about that! After he was sentenced, though being a copper he knew very well what respect is due to a judge, he burst out against his 'accomplice,' as he called poor old Jenner, saying he'd done the dirty on him, and how he'd be even with him yet. He didn't get very far, of course, with that sort of stuff, before he was taken off, but it made quite a sensation at the Assizes. Remembering it now, Mr. Severn, I can't think how I came to say just now that Jenner never made an enemy. But after all it's a long time ago and I

dare say that when Garlock had finished doing time he may have felt different about it. Anyway when he came out he left the country.'

"Left the country!" exclaimed Hilary. "And did he never come back? But I suppose you don't know where he is now? Perhaps he is dead by this time?"

"Well, he may be, sir, but I haven't heard of it. I fancy he's still in Canada or the United States. But anyhow poor Dave's dead."

"Yes," said the visitor slowly, "and that's just why I came to you, Mr. Hanson. Mrs. Jenner will have it that there was foul play involved in her husband's death, and talked about some old enemy at Winridge. But if this Garlock is still in America—if alive at all—he can't have anything to do with it."

Mr. Hanson's little eyes had opened very wide. "Foul play, sir! But in the bit I read about the inquest there was no mention of such a thing!"

"No, and the verdict was 'Death by misadventure.' Apparently the coroner didn't attach any importance to Mrs. Jenner's idea, and the police have not taken it up in any way, so far as I know. The poor woman was just thought to be overstrained. But she hasn't abandoned her theory, in fact she is quite obsessed by it—says her husband had previously received a worrying letter which he destroyed without showing it to her, and that he complained, a little before the tragedy, of having been followed by some unseen person. I wish I could get the idea out of her mind. Now if this Garlock should turn out to be dead, or safely in America, it would do it, I think. Is there no way of finding out something definite about him, locally?"

Mr. Hanson considered. "I suppose old Miss Grimes, his aunt that he used to live with, must know something.

She's been here ever since. Folks that know her say she hears from him sometimes, but I don't know if it's true."

"His aunt still lives here? Could I see her, do you think?" ("Only I should not much care for the job of asking her perhaps to incriminate her nephew," thought Hilary; and then perceived a more cheering aspect of the matter. He would really be asking her to clear him.)

"I expect you could, Mr. Severn. Anyhow it's worth trying, ain't it? I'll run you round to Miss Grimes's in no time in my car. Allow me!" Mr. Hanson opened the door of "Bella Vista's" drawing-room with a flourish, and followed his visitor out of its garish splendours to the front door and the Morris-Oxford.

"Yes, Winridge is a very different place from what it was in poor old Dave's day," commented Mr. Hanson approvingly as they moved off down Percy Road. "When I bought his mother's little business in '14, Mr. Severn, I never thought such a one-horse village would develop into this!" And he spoke as might some original Australian settler whose life had been miraculously prolonged to behold Melbourne or Sydney in their glory.

"I suppose not," said his passenger without enthusiasm. "And why *has* it . . . developed . . . so?"

"The new arterial road, sir, the new arterial road!" cried Mr. Hanson joyfully. In such tones might an Egyptian cultivator speak of the fructifying Nile. "It's that as brought it all about. You see, here was Winridge all ready for them to settle in as wanted the convenience of a first-class road to London, but didn't want to live *on* it, in this here ribbon development—superior people, you see, sir. So all this nice residential quarter grew up quite quickly, with wonderful results for trade. You'd not believe how my business has expanded these last three years or so! Jenner,

poor chap, he'd be astonished if he saw what his mother's poky little shop was now. And you know, sir," added Mr. Hanson with what seemed genuine compassion, "I've often felt it unfair, like, that he should have ended by being only a country postman, and me, what was no better off than him before the war, doing as well as I am to-day. I hope he's been able to put something by for his widow."

"I believe so—but I shall make it my business to find out," said Hilary. "Is this where Miss Grimes lives?" for they were drawing up at the last house of a small terrace.

A few minutes later, feeling rather as if he were at the dentist's, he stood in a very prim little parlour face to face with a small, bowed, wrinkled old woman, impeccably neat in a black dress of extinct cut.

Mr. Hanson had brought him in and introduced him as a gentleman from London who wanted to see her on business, and had then tactfully taken himself off. But though the amateur investigator was, so to speak, vouched for by this local worthy, he had still to explain to Miss Grimes upon what errand he had come, and he found it difficult.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" suggested she a little tremulously. "If you've come all the way from London . . ."

"Does the poor old lady think I've walked?" thought Hilary. He would have preferred to stand, but that would have been to keep her standing too, so he sat down in a stiff upholstered chair. And still he sought for a beginning. The antimacassars, blue vases, and dried grasses of his surroundings provided no inspiration.

"It wasn't about rooms you've come, sir, is it?" hazarded Miss Grimes. "Because I haven't let for years; I'm getting too old."

"No, Miss Grimes, not rooms. I've come—rather un-

willingly—to ask you a question. You need not answer it unless you wish.”

A look of alarm was visible in the little old face. “You—you’re not a police officer, are you, sir? From your saying I needn’t answer.”

“No, no,” replied Hilary hastily. “I am just an ordinary private person, I give you my word for that. But I am trying to find out something in order to—look here, Miss Grimes, I will be perfectly frank with you. And you mustn’t mind if I refer to that unfortunate affair years ago, in which your nephew P.C. Garlock was involved. I’m sorry to have to do it, but someone else’s peace of mind is bound up with it.”

He *was* sorry as he saw the little old woman flush and shrink. But in his mind’s eye was the more tragic figure of another woman, and the image of Mrs. Jenner was with him as he related, as gently as possible, the story of her husband’s end, of the suspicion which was torturing her, and of his own desire to allay it.

“Now, Miss Grimes, if I can assure that poor widow that she need not have any such wild fancies about her husband’s death, you see what a very great relief it would be to her.”

He gazed with a harassed expression at the old woman, who had her handkerchief to her eyes, and by this time was crying.

“He was such a dear little boy,” she faltered. “I always had the charge of him. . . . Yes, he was tempted, sir—but he paid for it, he paid for it. And its hard that after nearly twenty years there should be a worse suspicion come on him!”

“But there isn’t any suspicion really, Miss Grimes,” Hilary assured her eagerly. “It’s only an idea existing in one poor woman’s overwrought mind—and I want to be

able to dispel even that." Miss Grimes, he noticed, had just used a past tense; he tried to suppress in his voice his half hope of what the answer might be as he went on to ask gently: "Your nephew is not dead, is he?"

Miss Grimes was drying her eyes. "He might be, sir, as far as my ever seeing him is concerned. But no, he's alive, poor boy, and carrying on as best he can in the United States of America. I hear from him now every Christmas, and sometimes on my birthday too; you see he still remembers his old aunt, who brought him up. He's doing better in the States than he did in Canada, and he's taken to sending me a little present—money for me to buy myself a little present, I mean."

"Then he's still overseas—he is in the States at the moment? I've tried to explain how important it is to know this for certain, Miss Grimes."

"Yes, sir, I understand that. Yes, he's there now at a place called Stotsville, in the part called Ohio. And in his last letter he said he had got a good appointment in some works or other, and that I mustn't look to see him over here for a while yet—because I had asked him whether he wasn't ever coming home so that I could have one more sight of him."

"I see," said Hilary, and his heart was lightened. It was pretty clear that Mrs. Jenner's shadowy "enemy" of that snowy night was not this man Garlock, and there was no one else who it could be. But he must pin down Garlock's alibi still more firmly.

"I suppose he hasn't changed his mind since writing you that letter?" he enquired.

"I couldn't say, sir, but I only got the letter a few days ago," replied the old woman.

"Oh, it's as recent as all that, Miss Grimes, is it? I

thought you said he always wrote at Christmas."

"Yes, sir, so I did, but this year he only sent a short line with his present at Christmas and said that he would write more fully later. And this letter was to tell me about his new job; see, here it is, sir! You can read it."

She fumbled in her pocket and produced a letter which Hilary took, glad not to have had to ask for it. It was fortunately complete with envelope and U.S. postage stamp, and a date stamp which was quite legible—Stotsville, Feb. 3rd. The same date and place were at the head of the sheet of paper within. Hilary did not precisely read the missive itself, written in a fairly good and rather distinctive hand, but he saw enough to establish the correctness of Miss Grimes's summary of its contents, and it was signed, "Your affectionate nephew, Robert Garlock."

It seemed conclusively to dispose of Mrs. Jenner's theory, for a man who was writing a letter in Stotsville, Ohio, on February 3rd, could not possibly have pushed a postman into a snowdrift in the Cotswolds on February 1st. But Hilary, fast becoming quite the detective, perceived another loophole which must be closed.

"You are quite sure, Miss Grimes," he said, somewhat apologetically, "that this is your nephew's own handwriting? I know that seems a foolish question to ask . . ."

By her expression Miss Grimes seemed to concur with this statement. "Why, who else's should it be, sir?" she enquired, and, as Hilary did not answer, went on, drawing herself up a little: "I've kept my eyesight wonderfully, I'm thankful to say: I don't wear glasses, even for reading, so of course I know my nephew's writing."

But Hilary was not in this happy position. For all he knew, anyone in the United States might have written that letter—though there certainly seemed no earthly reason why

anybody but the man whose name was signed to it should have done so. But how was he to put to the old woman, without offence, the possibility of wilful deception?

He spread out the letter on a little table at his elbow and pondered over it, marking the way the writer crossed his t's and turned the tails of his g's, with an idea that these traits were important.

"That's all right, sir, isn't it?" enquired Miss Grimes, getting up. "You see," here her gnarled old finger came on to the top of the page, "you see it's written from this place, Stotsville, and the date—the date is on the envelope here too."

"Yes, I saw that," answered Hilary, still casting about for words. "But the only thing, Miss Grimes," he went on slowly, wishing himself anywhere else, "the only thing is that I don't know your nephew's handwriting. If you would be so kind as to show me another letter or two of his . . . that would clinch the matter. Then there could not be any doubt that it is really he who has written this one."

There was a momentary silence.

"You mean to say, sir, that you believe I may be showing you a made-up letter!" Miss Grimes's voice shook; then she went on with dignity. "I think you can't be telling me quite the truth. You *must* be connected with the police—no *gentleman* would have thought of a thing like that!" With this shaft she left him, and travelled slowly to an old-fashioned bureau against the wall. "You shall see all my nephew's letters—even those from prison."

Hilary was on his feet. "Miss Grimes, I do assure you . . ."

"There's no need, sir, to waste words. I can see what you think." And the old lady began to unlock a drawer.

"But it is to your nephew's own advantage that his alibi should be established as firmly as possible," protested Hilary, feeling like a convict himself.

"*Alibi!*" repeated Miss Grimes under her breath with a passionate emphasis. It was the only word she spoke, but her worst retort was the tear which splashed suddenly on to the carefully tied-up bundle of letters just before she thrust it into Hilary's half unwilling hand.

"Please to unfasten those, sir, and take some, and put them alongside of the other. I hope they will convince you . . . Robert was like the apple of my eye to me, but if he went wrong *I* never have, and, please God, I never shall."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"No, quite clearly there's nothing in it," replied Hilary in response to his sister's question, when the parlour-maid had left the room with the soup-plates (for he had only got back to Ormiston Place in time for dinner). "The only man who could possibly have had a grudge against poor Jenner is in America—has been there for years."

"But there was a possible enemy, then?" asked Rosalind.

"Yes," began Hilary, but before he could add anything more Quentin burst in.

"There *was* someone, Uncle Hilary? I say, how splendid!"

"Quentin," said his mother reprovingly, "it's very rude to interrupt your uncle like that. Besides, it's hardly 'splendid'."

"But, Mother, it is—don't you see? . . . Only if the grudger is still in America I'm afraid he can't have pushed——"

"Now, that's enough," interposed Hilary quietly but firmly. He knew that the boy meant no harm, but his childish, impersonal interest in a possible 'mystery' jarred on him, to whom Jenner's death was a personal matter. "I'll tell you about it afterwards, Rosalind," he added, as the customary Saturday night's roast chicken made its appearance.

"We've got something to tell *you*, Uncle Hilary!" announced Quentin a moment later. "Something very exciting. And that's why you had better go easy with that fowl, hadn't he, Mother?—because of supper to-morrow."

"My dear child," remarked his mother, "my Sunday's housekeeping is not entirely based on one chicken."

"I suppose," commented Hilary as he began to carve, "—liver, Rosalind?—you are hinting that we are to have a guest or guests to-morrow evening?"

"Not a guest, a visitor," replied Quentin, in whose mind there evidently existed some subtle distinction between the two.

"Shall I be pleased or the reverse?" asked Hilary.

"I don't know, Uncle Hilary. Can I have the merry-thought—or perhaps you'd better save it for . . . I nearly said who. I don't mind if she does have it."

"She? A female then? A friend of yours, Rosalind?"

"Well, a very new one," answered his sister with a smile. "I met her for the first time this afternoon. I'd better tell you, Hilary—I have asked Miss Page to stay here, and she's coming to-morrow. Her aunt, Lady Monckton, with whom she was stopping, has been suddenly taken ill, and went into a nursing home this morning. It's not very serious, I gather, though there may have to be an operation. I learnt this when Denzil brought Miss Page to see me this afternoon, and it also came out that she was still undecided what to do, for though she has a good many friends and acquaintances in London, she seemed to think that there was no one with whom she could at the moment conveniently stay. So I asked her if she would care to make this her headquarters for the present, rather than stay on alone at Lady Monckton's. She seemed very pleased at the idea, and she's coming to-morrow. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not. On the contrary, I shall be delighted," said her brother. "It will give me an excellent chance of really getting to know Denzil's future wife."

"Shall I be able to go to the wedding?" put in Quentin eagerly.

"That depends rather upon where it is, and also, on whether you are asked," responded his uncle. "I've no idea yet when it is to be, either."

On Sunday afternoon Hilary wrote a long letter to Mrs. Jenner. About six o'clock Miss Chloe Page arrived, looking charming in a mink coat and a little blue hat. Folyat had brought her in his car and, as previously arranged, stayed to supper at Ormiston Place. And it was again a revelation to Hilary to see the pride and pleasure with which he watched Rosalind's reception of his fiancée, and the quiet consideration which he showed a little later, asking Hilary if he might telephone on her behalf to the nursing home for the latest news of her aunt.

It was not until Hilary and his friend were left alone in the dining-room that Denzil broached the question of Hilary's recent investigations, to which as yet no reference had been made by anyone.

"Am I to congratulate you, Dr. Severn?" he asked, with a half satirical smile. "(So many detectives in fiction seem to be doctors.) Are you upon the trail?"

"Yes and no. I found it, but it led—as I hoped—to a dead end," replied Hilary, passing the port. "I discovered the villain of the piece, but——"

Denzil leant forward. "What! There really was one?"

"Yes, but he wasn't available for that particular performance. I mean I traced the only man who had a perhaps reasonable grudge against poor old Jenner—but as I traced him to a place in Ohio, where he undoubtedly still is, or at least was up to February 3rd, he can't possibly have had a hand in landing Jenner in that snowdrift. And of

course no sensible person ever thought he had. But I am glad to have laid this phantom of Mrs. Jenner's imagination—it's a relief to my own mind too.—Have a cigar?"

"I'm not sure," said Folyat, as he took one, "that it isn't a relief to me also. The rôle of Watson is rather a stultifying one."

"But, my dear fellow, you haven't been playing it! Watson, during my researches (if you can dignify them by that name) has been conspicuous by his absence!"

"You never asked me to accompany you," answered Folyat, cutting his cigar.

"You never offered to come!" retorted Hilary. He was only joking, as Folyat was, of course, but to his surprise this remark appeared to be taken seriously.

"I know I ought to have offered to drive you down to Hertfordshire yesterday," said his friend, "but I couldn't very well, because of Chloe."

"As if I should have bothered you! And the latter part of my investigations was . . . distinctly trying. I had to hurt the feelings of the suspect's aunt—poor old thing—before I could establish his alibi to my satisfaction."

"Good Lord, Hilary, you *are* playing the part with spirit! You have even adopted the terminology! Well, who was the man, and how did you satisfy yourself about his alibi? Notoriously slippery things, alibis, aren't they?"

Hilary told him briefly the story of the ex-policeman and his downfall, and of his own comparison of his earlier letters to his aunt with his latest epistle, of which date and postmark were quite clear. "I hated that part, Denzil—questioning the old lady, but at least it settled the matter conclusively. The handwriting of all the letters was identical; the man who wrote the most recent from Ohio on February 3rd was the same who had written the others,

even the ones from prison. There could be no doubt about that."

"So you are satisfied that this man is in America and had nothing to do with . . . the tragedy," remarked Folyat, surveying the end of his cigar.

"Of course I am. A man can't be in two places at once! I only hope Mrs. Jenner will be prepared to admit that obvious truth. Well, enough of that subject. I don't believe I have actually said, Denzil, what a real pleasure it was to find on my return that Miss Page was coming to stay here. You'll treat this house as your own, won't you?"

"Don't I always?" asked Folyat smiling. "Your sister's present kindness is only an extension of what she always shows me. That reminds me" (he pulled out a pocket book), "that she promised just now to dine with Chloe and me and do a play. Now would Wednesday evening suit *you* all right?"

It was a relief to be done with this Jenner business, reflected Hilary as he shaved on the following Thursday morning. It suited ill, somehow, with the presence of Miss Chloe Page at 6, Ormiston Place, though she had been most sympathetic about the postman's death, of which Quentin, at the first opportunity, had given her a highly coloured version, afterwards toned down by his uncle to more sober hues.

Hilary, accustomed to the modern young woman, had never met one quite like Chloe Page. With one exception there was nothing out of date about her appearance; her outlook he had not yet had a chance to explore. But she certainly possessed a serenity and a sort of gentle reserve which were not at all contemporary; nor did she, to his relief as much as to Rosalind's, paint her mouth the colour

of a mail-van and display blood-steeped talons at the end of her slim fingers. The only colour there was Denzil's emerald ring. Hilary, putting away his razor, found himself wondering whether her charming little old-fashioned name had helped to make her what she was—but how could it? Last evening, when they had all gone to the play with Denzil, he had come suddenly to the conclusion that the whole effect she produced upon him might have been typified by that smooth honey-coloured hair of hers, shining always, morning or evening, with a kind of soft lambency. Fortunate Denzil!

That Denzil knew he was fortunate was clear. Undemonstrative though he was (at least in public) to the point of coolness, he was nevertheless very much in love with her. Hilary, who knew him so well, had been more than ever convinced of that fact last night at the theatre, merely by the way he looked at her. And Chloe was certainly in love with Denzil, though in her case Hilary naturally could not judge how deeply.

Hilary had congratulated himself too soon. When he came down to breakfast he found Quentin poring over an envelope, and was greeted by his eager exclamation, "Oh, Uncle Hilary, there's a letter for you from Charton—at least I think it's Charton, though the postmark . . ."

"Quentin," interrupted his mother, "give that letter to your uncle at once! You must know by now that other people's letters are no concern of yours."

"Even their outsides, Mother?" protested Quentin. "I didn't think there was any harm in just looking at the envelope. I'm sorry, Uncle Hilary."

"That's all right, but you *are* getting rather too inquisitive," agreed his uncle, taking the letter. He saw that it

was from Mrs. Jenner, but in the interests of discipline he repressed the impulse to say so, put it down unopened by his plate, and turned to greet Chloe, who had at that moment come into the room.

"Am I late?" she asked, "I thought I was very punctual!"

"So you are," said Rosalind smiling, "especially as we were rather late last night. But then I suppose that nothing before the small hours is late to you young people of the present day, and besides, no one seems to expect them to be in time for meals."

"Oh, you're quite wrong as far as I'm concerned, Mrs. Fortescue," returned Chloe gaily.—"Yes, please, Mr. Severn, I'd like some fish . . . I'm quite Edwardian, you know. With us in the country midnight seems quite late, and my father, who is an early riser, always expects me to be down to pour out his coffee on the stroke of half-past eight. . . . Letters for me? One from Aunt Emily, in pencil, poor dear! Will you excuse me?" She opened and read it. "Oh, I'm not to go and see her this afternoon; she will be having some other visitors."

So far Miss Page had been to see her aunt every day, though anxiety about Lady Monckton's condition was already less. It seemed, however, that she was likely to be longer in the nursing home than was originally thought, since if there were to be an operation it could not take place yet.

Breakfast proceeded for a while, until the visitor, looking up from another letter, observed, "I hope you won't mind, Mrs. Fortescue, if a man should come and ask to see me one of these days? I mean—well, what people of my aunt's generation call 'a common man.' Our housekeeper at home writes that a man turned up recently at the Manor and seemed disappointed that he could not see Miss Chloe;

he said he remembered me as a little girl at Colchester when the regiment was there. He was a gardener of ours, apparently. I can't say I remember anyone of the name of Collins, but I may well have forgotten, as I was quite small."

"Anyway, he appears not to have forgotten you," said her hostess. "And is he in London now? Of course you shall see him, if you are in when he comes. Did your housekeeper recognise him?"

"She would not be able to, for she was not with us in the Colchester days, nor any of the other servants, except the butler, and he is having a holiday. But as this Collins said he was coming to London, Mrs. Miller gave him this address."

Here Quentin, who had been sunk in deep thought for a moment or two, enquired abruptly:

"Miss Page, in the country does the postman knock when he brings a letter?"

"Not always. I should say it depends on whether the house has a knocker. Why, Quentin?"

"I was thinking about the man who killed—I mean," he hastily corrected himself, "if there *was* a man who killed Jenner. You see, every time a postman knocked at his door it would make him jump and feel horrid. Just think," he went on at high speed, addressing the company, "he would begin to hate it, the murderer I mean, and then he would get the postman not to knock when he came, because it made him feel so awful, and the postman would wonder why, and try to find out, and other people too, who noticed that he never knocked at the murderer's house . . . and in the end it would all be found out."

At this remarkable hypothesis even Hilary could not suppress a smile, while Chloe, plainly amused, objected,

"But, Quentin, the man might easily give other reasons for asking the postman not to knock—like headaches, or nerves, or an invalid in the house!"

"No," retorted the boy eagerly, "because he would be a very strong man who never headached or anything, and everyone else in the house was very strong, or perhaps—yes, I expect this is it, he lived by himself. Just imagine," went on Quentin, his eyes shining, "he would be sitting there alone, thinking his bad thoughts, and then suddenly there would come a noise like this!" A wooden pepper-grinder was called into violent play.

"Quentin, please don't—you'll have all the things off the table!" protested his mother.

"And then he would jump up, thinking, 'That's the postman, another postman, and the postman I killed and put in a snowdrift is very likely a skeleton by now.' How long do people take to turn into skeletons?" he enquired in a totally different and matter-of-fact tone.

"Now, Quentin, be quiet!" said Hilary sharply. "We have no wish to listen to your studies in the gruesome. Don't let me hear you mention postmen or Jenner again for the rest of the week!" His tone was so unusually stern that Quentin was instantly suppressed, and this time finished his breakfast in a slightly injured silence.

It was not until he had departed for school that Hilary opened and read the letter from Charton.

"Good heavens! This is worse than ever!" he exclaimed at the end. "Mrs. Jenner has got another bee in her bonnet!"

"Oh, what is it, Mr. Severn?" asked Chloe.

"Suppose you read us the letter, Hilary," said Rosalind, and her brother complied.

"Dear Mr. Hilary

"Thank you for your kind letter and for putting yourself to the Trouble of going to Winridge to make enquireys all for nothing the man Garlock Being you say in America and if so can't be got at but well I knew there was someone from Winridge as Hated my poor David and would have done him an injury if able."

Hilary paused, and Rosalind remarked, "It's rather difficult to follow, but it almost sounds as though she didn't want to admit that this man Garlock can't possibly have had anything to do with it."

"I was a little afraid that she might take it like that," said Hilary gloomily. "But she's quite inconsistent, for at the same time she is on the track of someone else. Listen to this:

"But now Mr Hilary Sir I have a Dreadful thing to tell you and what you'll hardly Believe that man Chapman what I told you wanted David's job and has got it put something in that current wine he gave Jenner that afternoon to make him drowsy-like so as he should fall asleep in the snow and I know what the stuff was and Where he bought it or I should say Mrs Chapman did and made a lame-sounding excuse for buying it and oh Mr Hilary what am I to do about it shall I go and tell the Police surely they won't laugh at me this time like they did before though not to my face and someone must be told for I can't rest until this Wickedness is punished for when I see that Chapman going about in my poor David's uniform and with his letter Bag and he his Murderer all the time I can't bear it."

Hilary laid the letter down. "Now what do you say to that?"

"What does she mean? A drug? It sounds to me quite mad!" said Rosalind; but Chloe, looking very grave, murmured, "Oh, poor, poor Mrs. Jenner!"

"You'll have to try and prevent her passing on this crazy idea to anyone else, Hilary," resumed Rosalind—"or she may find herself in serious trouble. Could you write to the Vicar and get him to do something—or perhaps the doctor would be better?"

Hilary did not answer at once, but sat looking rather harassed. Then he said slowly, "No, I believe I shall have to go to Charton myself and look into this matter—find out what this about Mrs. Chapman buying 'stuff' amounts to. I expect it's all moonshine. In any case I would rather not write even to the Vicar; his sister, who would probably be shown the letter, has got her knife into Mrs. Jenner already. If necessary I'll see the doctor . . . I could go on Saturday. I've no engagement except golf with Pemberton, and if I put him off now he'll have time to find someone else." Suppressing a sigh, Hilary rose. "I'll write a line to Mrs. Jenner and tell her to hold her tongue till she sees me on Saturday."

"Well, I must say, Hilary, you *are* good-natured!" commented his sister.

"I think I could find a nicer word than that!" said Miss Chloe Page, a little shyly.

Quentin's manner towards his uncle for the next twenty-four hours was marked by a dignified reserve, the maintenance of which probably cost some effort. On Friday, however, about half-past six, when Hilary, just returned from the War Office, was talking to his sister and Chloe

Page, there was a knock at the drawing-room door.

"Come in," said Rosalind, prepared to correct the new parlourmaid for the solecism. But it was her son who entered, an appearance of grave concentration on his visage. He marched up to Hilary, who was standing on the hearth-rug, and without a word held up to his gaze a rather grubby piece of paper bearing the following legend inscribed upon it in capitals, which formed the sole fount possessed by his toy printing press:

~~"PLAESE~~ PLEASE MAY I SAY SOMETHING
ABOUT JENNER IT IS V IMPORTANT!"

"Why this method of communication?" asked his uncle.

"Because the week isn't up yet you said I wasn't to mention *him* in," retorted Quentin, pointing with an ink-stained finger. "I thought you wouldn't mind my *writing* his name."

"But what have you got to say about him?" asked Hilary, conscious of Chloe's delighted and delightful little gurgle of suppressed laughter behind him.

"It is not exactly *about* him, Uncle Hilary—it's in connection with him. Uncle Hilary—and Mother—and Miss Page—*this house is being watched!*"

"Nonsense, Quentin," said Rosalind. "You are making that up! Besides, if it were, what would that have to do with poor Jenner?"

"I don't quite know yet, Mother, but of course it has," replied Quentin, as though the fact were self-evident. "Twice lately I've seen a man hanging about; the first time was on Wednesday evening when I went to take my football boots to be mended; he was standing near the gate. Of course I didn't think anything about it then; but he

was there again, walking up and down, when I came back from school yesterday, and then I remembered him. And I think I saw him here this evening on the other side of the road."

"But you couldn't be sure it was the same man, Quentin," objected his mother.

"Oh yes, I was; he had the same kind of Burberry on, rather short and with a belt, and even dirtier than Uncle Hilary's."

"That's uncalled for, Sherlock!" said Uncle Hilary. "And I expect the man had a perfectly good reason for being in this road; probably waiting for his young lady to come out with him."

"I know!" said Rosalind. "It's that old retainer of yours, Miss Page, waiting for a chance to see you—probably too shy to come and ring the bell!"

"What retainer?" asked Quentin, alert at once. "Oh, I know. I don't somehow think he was a retainer," he said with the air of one who specialised in recognising them. "But," he added joyfully, "he might have been a *detective*, 'keeping observation'! That's what they call it, Mother," he explained.

"Yes, but on whom? Nobody in this house, I hope, needs watching by a detective. . . . Unless, of course"—Rosalind looked worried—"it's the new house-parlourmaid."

"I don't think you need fear that," said Hilary. "If this fellow is seen again he should be asked what he wants, and if he can't give a satisfactory answer, I shall speak to a policeman. Can't you tell us what he was like, Quentin, in addition to his wearing this Burberry which you have so offensively described?"

"Well, I haven't seen him in a good light, but he looks kind of solid. Was your old retainer like that, Miss Page?"

"The trouble is that I can't remember him at all," said Chloe, "which seems rather unkind, doesn't it, if he has come three times to see me and is too timid to ask for me."

"But I don't think it's him—I think it's a detective from Scotland Yard," said Quentin happily.

So once again Hilary went down to Charton, but this time by the afternoon train, and in due course the 7.42 on Sunday evening brought him back. On the stroke of ten, cold and rather dispirited, he put his latchkey into the door of 6, Ormiston Place, and told himself that at any rate this was the last time he would make a similar expedition.

He found Rosalind and Chloe in the drawing-room. Folyat, it appeared, had come in for coffee but had already gone home. Assuring them that he had dined in the train, Hilary subsided into an armchair by the fire, and gratefully accepted the drink which Rosalind insisted on fetching for him. He found himself wondering uncomfortably, and for the first time in their acquaintance, why Denzil's early departure seemed rather a relief. Well, he was tired, and Denzil's comments on the result of his latest researches at Charton would almost certainly have been sarcastic rather than sympathetic—for he had never seen Mrs. Jenner in her frantic grief, nor had he known Jenner personally. It was only natural that by this time he should be rather bored with the whole business. But Hilary could not disguise from himself the fact that, quite apart from the Jenner affair, it was pleasanter to be sitting here peacefully with his sister and Chloe without Denzil's sometimes too magnetic presence.

For Chloe was not bored or unsympathetic—far from it.

And it was she now who, even before Rosalind, asked eagerly:

"And how did you get on, Mr. Severn? Were you able to do anything to help that poor Mrs. Jenner?"

"No, I fear I have done nothing," responded Hilary with a sigh; "nothing, at any rate, that she would consider a help. I've exploded another mare's nest, that's all. Of course Jenner wasn't drugged!"

"Well, isn't she grateful to you for proving that?" asked Rosalind. "She surely doesn't *want* to think that her husband was drugged! What put the idea into her head?"

Hilary finished his whisky and soda and put down the glass. "I'll tell you the whole thing as shortly as I can. It seems that about a week ago Mrs. Jenner's neighbour, Mrs. Spragg, was taken ill with . . . er—some sort of internal attack" (actually, to Hilary's embarrassment, Mrs. Jenner had been much more explicit than that). "So Mrs. Jenner, after the foolish habit of her class, went, not to the doctor, but to the village shop, which sells everything, to get some remedy for her. Well, Mrs. Dyer of the shop, in producing some specific or other, remarked that it was a pity she hadn't any chlorodyne left, but she had sold the last bottle in stock to Mrs. Chapman. It wasn't often asked for, and perhaps just as well, seeing that one had to be careful with the dose. Mrs. Jenner on that asked if it was dangerous to take, and was told that it contained laudanum, which was a poison, and might put you to sleep if you took too much of it. At that of course Mrs. Jenner pricked up her ears, and elicited the fact that Mrs. Chapman had not bought the chlorodyne because it was needed at the moment, but only because she wanted to have the stuff by her, as she was subject to attacks for which the doctor had recommended it. The date of purchase appeared

to have been just before the snowstorm. Mrs. Jenner went out of the shop firmly convinced that the contents of that bottle had gone into the currant wine which the Chapmans had given Jenner on the day of his death."

"Oh, Hilary, what nonsense!" came from Rosalind.

"I thought so, of course; and I argued with her. I pointed out first of all that in that case Chapman would certainly not have volunteered the information that he gave Jenner the currant wine. But that made very little impression. So then I said that this suggestion of hers was in flat contradiction to her former contention that Jenner never would have accepted a drink while on duty, and that Chapman had lied when he said he had; she couldn't have it both ways. She was obliged to admit that, but stuck to it that if Jenner did drink anything the Chapmans gave him, then it had been doctored with this chlorodyne. No amount of telling her that the mere possession of the stuff wasn't evidence that it had been used in any criminal way had the slightest effect; so, after a bit I left her, promising to make some further enquiries.

"I thought the only thing to do was to go and see the doctor, tell him the whole story, and find out whether he had really recommended Mrs. Chapman to keep chlorodyne by her. I couldn't get hold of him until this morning, but then I put the whole case before him. To my amazement his first remark was, not, as I expected, that Mrs. Jenner was crazy, but that if Mrs. Chapman had really said he had ordered her to take chlorodyne it was untrue; he had never done anything of the sort."

"Good gracious, Hilary!" exclaimed Rosalind, startled. "Why, that really looked suspicious!"

"Yes," agreed Hilary, "I admit that for a moment Dr. Harding and I stared at each other rather blankly. But then

he modified the effect of his first remark by saying, 'It's quite true that Mrs. Chapman has a troublesome appendix, which will have to come out one of these days; and she may have thought chlorodyne a suitable palliative, but I certainly don't!' Then he jumped up, saying he would go and see the Chapmans and get to the bottom of this tale. He was really very decent about it, and said he would manage without bringing Mrs. Jenner's name into it at all. So off he went, and, to cut a long story short, came to me at the "Trout" this afternoon with a complete refutation of the whole charge. Mrs. Chapman had admitted buying the chlorodyne for no better reason, as Dr. Harding put it, than that some medical man somewhere, years ago, had prescribed it for something quite different for somebody else, and she had therefore thought it might do her good! But, as a matter of fact, not having had an attack of pain lately, she had not used it; and she had shown Dr. Harding the bottle still unopened. From her Dr. Harding had gone and routed Mrs. Dyer out of her Sunday repose, and after a good deal of difficulty had definitely established the fact that the bottle had been sold not before, but two days *after* Jenner's disappearance."

"Well, that settled it!" exclaimed Rosalind.


"Then I suppose you had to go and make Mrs. Jenner believe that? I expect it was difficult, wasn't it?" asked Chloe sympathetically.

"Yes, it was; it was even rather painful," admitted Hilary. "Dr. Harding came with me, and he did most of the talking. She said, 'Yes, I see, sir,' and 'I'm sorry, sir' and 'No, sir, I'll say no more about it,' but all the time I could see she was not really convinced a bit. Dr. Harding was quite kind but very firm—he had to be, of course—only I was sorry he made such a lot of her having fetched me down

all the way from London 'to listen to this nonsense,' which upset her, naturally. Then she begged my pardon—and it was miserable altogether."

"But you did your best for her—and a great deal more than most people would bother to do!" said Chloe warmly. "I am sure she must be grateful to you, really."

"I dare say she is underneath," admitted Hilary, but without conviction. "Anyhow I could not bear to leave her under the impression she had been a nuisance, so I stayed behind after the doctor had gone, and told her she wasn't ever to hesitate to write to me and let me know if there was anything I could do for her. I took the opportunity too," he added, more to Rosalind than to Chloe, "of asking her about her financial position, and was glad to find that it was all right, and that there seems to be some plan of her going eventually to live with a widowed brother, who is apparently quite prosperous. But with regard to Jenner's death, though her mind is not at rest—she was even harking back to the exploded Garlock—she won't, I am afraid, write to me again; so, as I said in the beginning, I haven't really helped her at all."



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ban on conversation about the Jenner case having been tacitly lifted, Quentin's violent interest in the postman's fate was able once more to find expression, and was stimulated even to fever heat on learning of his uncle's second visit to Charton, which it was impossible to keep from him, though Hilary felt he had been weak in revealing the reason for it. Proportionately great, therefore, was Quentin's disappointment on hearing that there was nothing in what he termed the 'poisoned drink' idea. He was driven in consequence to produce a much more extravagant theory of his own.

He and his uncle were alone in the drawing-room about half-past six next evening when he observed reflectively, "It was frightfully clever of you, Uncle Hilary, to find out that that 'chloro' something or other wasn't put into the currant wine, but do you know, I've had another thought, quite different, about what the murderer might have done?"

"Haven't you any home-work to-day?" asked Hilary discouragingly, looking across at the boy where he stood in the window whirling round the tassel of the blind cord.

"I've finished it. Since I've had to think such a lot about how poor Jenner was killed——"

"*Had* to think? Nobody wants you to think about it—very much the contrary. And I'm tired of telling you that he wasn't killed," grumbled Hilary.

"But what I was going to say, Uncle Hilary, was that it's made me do my home-work much quicker—and that's a good thing, isn't it? I think detecting must sort of oil the brain."

"What one would like to know," observed his uncle as he opened the evening paper, "is the view which your instructors take of the *products* of this lubricated organ."

"'Lubricated organ!'" repeated Quentin giggling. "What topping words you do use, Uncle Hilary! But is my brain an organ?"

"I should rather call it a dynamo; it keeps your tongue in perpetual motion!—Can't you find something better to do than fidget with that blind cord?"

"All right," said Quentin, coming and plumping himself down on a footstool in front of the fire. "I'll think hard about my new idea, and then I can try it on Miss Page when she comes in."

He sat thus for some peaceful moments, his freckled face propped on his fists, voyaging through strange seas of thought alone, while Hilary read the *Evening Standard*.

But he soon found that he was not reading it with much attention, nor was he really thinking of Mrs. Jenner and yesterday's errand. He was subconsciously listening for the sound of voices which would tell him that Chloe Page had returned from the charity *matinée* to which Folyat had taken her and Rosalind.

The discovery was somewhat of a shock to him. Then he told himself that he was a fool to find it a shock. Miss Page was a charming visitor to have in the house; what more natural than to look forward to her return to it?

The Newton upon the hearthrug suddenly sprang to his feet. "Here's the Rolls-Bentley!" he cried, having developed some mysterious faculty of detecting the sound of Folyat's car among the thousand and one that rushed daily up and down Ormiston Place. "If Mr. Folyat comes in I can tell him my theory."

"No, you are not to!" ordered Hilary, but the theorist was already through the drawing-room door. After a moment the young man followed him, and found the two ladies in the hall thanking Denzil for their entertainment, after which they went upstairs to take off their things.

"Hallo, Quentin! What have you been up to lately?" enquired Denzil good-humouredly of the boy hovering at his elbow.

Thus supplied with a first-class opening Quentin answered promptly, "I've been working at a new theory of how Jenner was murdered. It's something that nobody would guess and I want——"

But Folyat had turned abruptly away. "Good Lord, Hilary, isn't that wretched affair decently buried now?"

Hilary frowned heavily at his nephew, but the frown had no effect. Quentin rattled on quickly: "I believe that the letter-box where Jenner collected the last collection had been filled with poison-gas, and when he opened it he got a great puff of it in his face, but he managed to get as far as——"

He himself got no further. "You're wasted on—what's the name of your school—Quentin!" said Folyat, but he said it neither kindly nor humorously. "It would really be better for everybody if you were removed to this place in the Cotswolds and kept there!"

There was in his voice such an unmistakable ring of hostility that even Quentin could not fail to hear it. He coloured up, murmured, "Oh, I'm sorry, sir!" and instantly drifted away. As for Hilary, his annoyance with Quentin was for a second or two swamped by surprise and a measure of resentment at the disagreeable tone of the reproof. Intending, a moment earlier, to apologise for the boy's pertinacity, he now did nothing of the sort, but merely asked

Folyat in a slightly perfunctory manner whether he would stop and have a smoke, and did not press him when Folyat said that he must be going.

As he stood on the doorstep, however, the latter said apologetically, "I'm sorry, old man; I didn't mean to prick Quentin's ingenious bubble with quite so heavy a hand. But, if you will forgive me for saying so, I'm getting a bit fed up with this Jenner business. After this last quixotic excursion of yours, of which Chloe told me, and its result, which I heard about this afternoon, I thought there really would be an end of it."

"Well," returned Hilary, still a trifle ruffled, but descending the steps with him, "I imagine that the subject of Jenner's death is a good deal more painful to me than it can be to you. But I don't take Quentin's childish enjoyment of the supposed mystery too seriously, though I have several times tried to choke him off the topic. It is not a very suitable one for him anyhow, and I shall insist now that he drops it entirely."

"I think it would be as well," replied Folyat, his hand on the gate. "Though, as you say, I have no real reason for minding what the boy says. But I am an irritable beast, as you must know by now, Hilary!"

"Oh, that's all right," replied Hilary. "And the matter really is at an end now. If Mrs. Jenner is not satisfied I can't help it—I'm not going to take any further steps.—By the way, Denzil," he added, as Folyat shut the door of the car on himself, "did Miss Page give you my message: that I shall be delighted to go with you and her to the fencing display on Thursday?"

"Yes, thanks, she did. I'm glad you'll come with us. Good night."

He started up the Bentley, and the loafer who had been

standing at a little distance, presumably admiring it, moved off.

It was only when Hilary was back in the house that he remembered Quentin's watcher in a burberry, and wished he had taken another look at the car's admirer. As it was, in the dusk he had received no distinct impression of the man at all.

When Thursday night came Hilary found himself in the position of Miss Page's sole escort to the display at the Regency Rooms, since Denzil, being one of the hosts, was unable to fetch her.

He himself, however, in white from head to foot, and looking more than commonly tall and lithe in it, and in his tight-fitting fencing jacket, came to speak to them almost directly they had found their seats. (He was also looking, Hilary thought, more than commonly pale, which was odd, for, since the occasion was not really a match, he could hardly be 'strung-up' about the result.)

"There'll be some bouts with the *épée* at the end," he told them, "but for the first part we are keeping to the foil. No sabres. I'll see you again later, Chloe; Hilary will explain things to you."

The first matter which needed explanation was the difference between foil and *épée*.

"The duelling-sword!" exclaimed the girl. "But isn't that dangerous?"

"Not unless one breaks; there's a stout button on the end." And having reassured, Hilary continued to enlighten her until the first couple of black-masked figures appeared on the platform, went through the salute, and fell on guard.

It was charming to watch Chloe's excitement and absorption in the play, especially as Denzil, with his lightning dex-

terity, his long reach, his supple wrist and his extreme lightness on his feet came off without a single hit being scored against him, which naturally enraptured her. In the interval he returned, as he had promised, to talk to them, his mask tucked under his arm, his foil dangling from his hand. Yet after receiving Chloe's radiant and congratulatory comments with a smile, he suddenly bent on her a glance so strange and sombre that Hilary was startled. Had it not been impossible he would have said that there was anguish in it. It was but momentary, that look, and he was glad to see that Chloe had missed it, for she was at that moment examining with interest the button at the end of her lover's foil.

The *épée* play which followed, with its tense and separated figures darting and thrusting at each other with the heavier weapon instead of being most of the time engaged, blade to blade, with the lighter, she followed breathlessly and a little nervously. "It *looks* dangerous!" Hilary heard her murmur. But Denzil, unless from over-eagerness, was in little danger, for the same immunity from hits attended him. He fought almost savagely, and yet at the end was the hero of an unusual incident which testified to rather astonishing self-control.

For the point of an *épée* did snap off—but it was not his opponent's, it was his own. Few men, in a bout so fast and furious, would have perceived it in time, and a more or less serious wound might have been inflicted as a result; but Folyat somehow realised it, checked himself in his attack, and in consequence received a hit himself, not liking, apparently, even to parry with a weapon having a naked point. A certain commotion was caused on the platform; Chloe gripped the arms of her seat.

"It's all right," said Hilary quickly, bending towards her.

"It's only something gone wrong with Denzil's sword." For the judges were examining the weapon; and next moment the spectators could see Folyat's adversary salute him with more than formal courtesy and then go over and shake hands.

Oddly enough, this occurrence and his own defeat appeared to have restored Folyat to a more normal frame of mind, for when at the conclusion of the display he came to Chloe and Hilary again he was joking with another man, whom he had brought to introduce to his betrothed. While this other fencer was talking to Chloe, Hilary seized the opportunity of commenting upon the good form which Denzil had displayed that evening. "Though you spoilt your score at the end it was a 'moral victory' for you. Rather clever of you to spot what had happened! I suppose the other fellow might really have been hurt, in spite of the jacket and all that, if you hadn't?"

"I know of a case where a broken *épée* point penetrated through the armpit into the lung," answered Denzil rather grimly. "I was sorry, though, that it was my point which went. If it had been Ferguson's——" He stopped, and for a second, no more, the sombre look flashed into his eyes and was gone again.

Hilary was conscious of a chill. "What then?"

But Denzil smiled, quite naturally. "Why, I might have scored my hit, instead of having to let him hit me, that's all."

Hilary had been looking forward to the following weekend, for which various plans had been mooted. Great was his surprise and disappointment, therefore, when, returning to lunch on Saturday, he found in the hall Chloe, wrapped in furs, with a dressing-case and suitcase by her side.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked in dismay. "You're not leaving us, surely?"

"Only for a few days," said she. "Frankly, I wish I weren't! But Denzil felt that he ought to take me to see his uncle—old Sir John Folyat at Haslemere, you know—so he arranged it by telephone, rather suddenly. I've had an early lunch and I'm expecting him every minute. We are driving down."

At this juncture Rosalind made her appearance. "Yes, isn't it disappointing that we are losing Chloe this weekend? But don't wait in the hall, my dear child; you'll get cold."

A ring at the door-bell interrupted her. "I expect that's Denzil," said Chloe, and Hilary, opening the door, revealed Folyat's tall figure.

"So you are taking Chloe away from us!" he said to him. (They were Chloe and Hilary to each other by this time.)

"Only for a day or two," replied his friend rather hurriedly. "Is she ready?—How do you do, Mrs. Fortescue? I'm so sorry if I have put you to any inconvenience over this early start!"

Hilary had a sudden puzzled feeling that Denzil, who usually carried off any situation with ease, was trying to use a light tone and signally failing to do so. Moreover, there was no hint of a smile on his face. He seized the suitcase in one hand and Chloe's arm in the other, and, with a brief word of farewell to Rosalind, escorted her down the steps and hurried her into the car. Hilary, who had followed with the dressing-case, had a further impression of an exceedingly grim face framed in the window of the Bentley as it shot forward. Had they quarrelled, those two? No, Chloe's look when Denzil came in was proof enough that they had not. But Denzil did seem in a very queer temper.

Hilary certainly spent a very different kind of week-end from the one he had pictured. It was rather trying that Denzil, whose time was all his own, should have selected the day and a half when Whitehall did not claim Hilary for this visit to Haslemere. Rosalind indeed betrayed some annoyance about it. "It's rather too bad," she said at lunch, "that this change of plans was made at the last moment, otherwise you might have had a game of golf this afternoon. I suppose it's too late to find a partner now?"

"Much too late," replied her brother. "It doesn't matter. I'll go for a walk instead."

And he tramped resolutely round Hyde Park in a very cold wind, and after tea buried himself in a detective story. Both occupations were designed to serve as a barrier against . . . something even the name of which he would not admit to himself.

On Sunday, hearing that Quentin's friend, the gifted Barclay major, was to spend the afternoon with him, and finding that Quentin had a passionate desire to visit the Science Museum in company with this youth, Hilary offered to take them there. As well that as anything; since yesterday all ways of passing the time had become equally tasteless. Yet he was still fighting to keep that fatal realisation at bay. Rosalind had pointed out that Quentin and his friend were quite capable of taking themselves to the Museum unaccompanied; but Quentin, and Barclay major, too, in spite of his spectacles, showed all the curious disinclination of dogs longing for a walk to set out on that walk without an escort.

Going in by the entrance in Imperial Institute Road the trio mounted to the almost prehistoric early motor-cars, and after examining these with the appropriate mixture of scorn and mirth, descended and wound round through Marine

Boilers to Marine Engines. And it was in that long vista of machines, case after case, in every one of which something or other was moving noiselessly and rhythmically up and down, that Hilary's last defences fell. He came to a standstill before some model engines labelled as those of the s.s. *A. Lopez*, 1865, while the boys, catching sight of the wing of an aeroplane in the distance, scuttled on ahead.

Surroundings less romantic could hardly have been found than that avenue of automata for a young man to face the fact that he was in love. But then the discovery was far from appearing in a romantic light to Hilary Severn, for he found it horrifying. Chloe was the affianced wife of his best friend. The situation was not only bitter and hopeless but it was also commonplace—at all events in novels.

Up and down glided the pistons, or whatever they were, of the s.s. *A. Lopez*, unhastening and relentless. "It is so," they seemed to say: "you're in love with her; just the sort of thing which has happened in fiction till people are sick of it; but you can't help yourself, you can't get away from it . . . any more than we can stop doing this—and incidentally working all the other models in these cases too!"

"Damn!" said Hilary under his breath. He could at least get away from these passionless and devilish machines, and he hurried between them to his charges who, at a considerable distance, were standing rapt before a kindred robot, also in motion.

"Hallo, Uncle Hilary! I didn't know you were so keen on engines! Just look at this enormous aeroplane one, then, with nine cylinders sticking out all round! Barclay says . . ."

Suppose Chloe had been there with him, gazing at this Bristol Jupiter engine . . . no, he wouldn't let her look at anything so inhuman. They would have studied the

great albatross in the case there, with its magnificent sweep of wing. But they would never do anything together! The only course to take with the discovery which he had just made was to batten it down, like a mutineer, under hatches, and go on with the business of life as if it wasn't there. He addressed his companions:

"You boys must see the actual machine in which Alcock and Brown made the first transatlantic flight in 1919. It's further on, I think. And remember," added Hilary in a slightly tutorial manner, "that it was we and not the Americans who have the credit of that. It's apt to be forgotten."

So, after a prolonged inspection of aeroplanes new and old, ending up with the Schneider Trophy flying-boat, they visited the old pit machinery—as Hilary rather vaguely took it to be—in the Central Hall. Automata again, but mostly at rest. After that the model uncle, tired of machines, spoke of the attractions of the Children's Gallery downstairs, though on hearing the name both little boys displayed some unwillingness to visit it. However, they were coerced, and once down, forgetting their manly pose, were frankly enthralled by the lighted scenes of Transport through the Ages, with their skilfully painted cyclorama backgrounds and their life-like modelled figures. But as Hilary passed with the youths from the Early Stone man carrying home the little slain horse for dinner, on through Roman, Medieval, Elizabethan, Georgian, modern times, Chloe stood by him again. . . . He was safer by the machines!

Perhaps that was why, when an extensive tour of the Children's Gallery was over, he found himself upstairs again, staring fascinated at something more inhuman still—the swaying pendulum suspended from the roof of the

building which shows by its deviation from the axis over which it is set in motion that the earth is turning in space. There came into Hilary's head: "O, let the solid ground Not fail beneath my feet, Before I too have found . . ." But he must never find it! And what he had learnt this afternoon had got not merely to be battened down, it must be killed, put under a tombstone as quickly as possible, and fastened down securely in a grave that was never visited.

"Come on, boys, if you've had enough! I believe there are to be muffins for tea."

"With jam on them," supplemented Quentin firmly.

There *was* jam on the muffins; in fact, by the end of the cheerful dining-room tea at which the two elders also assisted, it was detected in some places not intended for its reception, as for instance on the rim of Master Barclay's spectacles. At the conclusion of the feast Hilary retired to his den, and was just filling the pipe which he sometimes smoked there when Rosalind entered, evidently wanting a chat.

"Am I interrupting letters or anything?"

"Not in the least." Her brother pushed forward a chair and poked the fire in his usual manner, by beating it on the top. "Are those boys all right? They've eaten so much that they can't indulge in any very active mischief, that's one thing."

"No, I should think not. At the moment they are trying to play chess—Barclay major's idea, and an excellent one as long as they don't lose any of the pieces. What I came in to say," went on Mrs. Fortescue, settling herself in the chair, "was that I had a visitor this afternoon when you were out. At least, he was not really calling on me but on

Chloe. It was a cousin of hers, apparently, a Mr. Milburn. He seemed a good deal disappointed at finding her out of town this week-end."

"Just as well, perhaps, that she was," commented Hilary, pausing in the act of lighting his pipe. "Denzil can't stand the man, and I admit that I'm not drawn to him, somehow."

"Then I'm afraid I've done the wrong thing," said his sister, "for I told him to come again any time he liked, when he might have better luck in finding Chloe in. Why does Denzil dislike him so?—he seemed pleasant enough. Is he an unsuccessful rival? But if so, the dislike should be on Mr. Milburn's side."

"I think it's mutual. I suspect myself that he was keen on Chloe, but Denzil never actually said so," replied Hilary, thinking of that crazy drive homewards from Lincott Manor.

"Has it occurred to you, Hilary," said Rosalind, putting her head back against the chair, "that Denzil isn't looking at all well? I was rather struck by his appearance when he came to fetch Chloe yesterday."

"Yes," admitted Hilary after a moment. "He didn't seem quite himself, either. And on Thursday night I thought——" He broke off. "I wonder if he is feeling seedy?"

"I should think Chloe must have noticed it," went on Rosalind thoughtfully. "But I suppose I had better not ask her."

"No, much better not call her attention to it," said her brother with decision. "For one thing, she would probably say something to him about it, and Denzil wouldn't like that. He can't stand anything in the nature of fussing."

Mrs. Fortescue compressed her lips a trifle. "Fond as I am of Denzil," she remarked, "I sometimes think there are rather too many things which he apparently can't stand. You must forgive me for saying it, Hilary, but he really is too easily irritated, and the propensity seems to be growing on him. At least I have had that impression lately—or am I mistaken?"

"Well, no," confessed Denzil's friend reluctantly. "I have sometimes thought the same thing myself recently. It must be that he is not well. What can be wrong, I wonder?"

Rosalind did not answer at once. Then she said rather hesitatingly, "I don't suppose you'll agree with me, Hilary, indeed I hope I am mistaken, but I have a strong suspicion that the trouble is not physical at all, but mental. Oh, I don't mean *that!*" as Hilary gave an ejaculation. "There's nothing wrong with Denzil's mind, but I'm sure he's not happy, and I have an uncomfortable feeling that the engagement is not really a success."

Hilary put down his pipe. "How can you say that, Rose," he exclaimed in a startled tone, "when Chloe is . . . so charming in every way!"

"My dear Hilary, I wasn't suggesting any shadow of criticism of Chloe—she's a perfect dear. I don't know that I meant any real criticism of Denzil either, only that they are not perhaps very well suited to each other. I really begin to think it more and more."

"But why?" asked Hilary frowning. "He is tremendously in love with her!"

"Undoubtedly. But it does not follow that he will know how to make her happy! And would you say, Hilary, that Chloe is also 'tremendously' in love with him?"

"Don't ask me! How should I know?" retorted Hilary with what sounded like unnecessary vehemence. Then he

added, in a more ordinary manner, "I see no reason to doubt it."

"Well, I can't help it, but I do!" said his sister. "Remember that I have seen them together oftener than you have. I think she admires Denzil greatly, is fascinated by him if you like, but I don't believe that she is really as much in love with him as . . . well, as she might be with someone who suited her better."

Hilary fidgeted in his chair. What about that strange look of Denzil's on Thursday night? "I wish you wouldn't raise such . . . such disturbing theories, Rose! After all you can't deny that Denzil's is a really outstanding personality. Any slight failings he may have are as nothing beside his great gifts. Chloe must know and appreciate that."

"My dear boy, I don't deny Denzil's gifts, but there are other—qualities, let us say, which may appeal more to some people. Chloe may not see him with quite the same eyes as you do."

At that Hilary got up and pretended to hunt for matches on the mantelpiece. "Look here, Rose, you don't know anything definite that makes you talk like this, do you? Chloe hasn't said anything to you?"

"No, nothing direct; she is far too loyal to do that. But once, in talking about Denzil to me, she let out that she had been a little afraid of him at first, and that she still felt she had a lot to learn about him. And I was rather struck, too, by the way she referred more than once to the fact that her father liked him so very much, and was so keen on the match. It almost sounded as though she were reassuring herself. I couldn't help wondering whether the General hadn't rather pushed her into the engagement. From a worldly point of view Denzil is a catch, of course."

"From every point of view," amended Hilary rather shortly. "And, if I may say so, I don't think all this speculation is particularly profitable."

"I expect you are right," replied his sister, not at all ruffled. She got up in her turn. "Anyway I must see what those children are doing. The chessmen are probably all over the floor by now."

But Hilary, who had just reproved his elder sister for fruitless speculation about other people's affairs, sat down again when she had gone and remained a long time without moving, holding his extinguished pipe in his hand. Then he laid it down, and put the hand over his eyes.



CHAPTER NINE

"Is that you? You are home early to-day!" remarked Rosalind Fortescue to her brother as he walked into the drawing-room at Ormiston Place next evening.

"Yes, I suppose I am. All serene here?"

"Well, Quentin seems to be starting a bad cold, and I've sent him to bed. He is so bored there, though, that I have promised to go up and read to him."

"Oh, bad luck!" said Hilary. "I suppose you haven't heard yet when those two are coming back from Haslemere?"

"They *are* back. They came this morning."

"This morning!" exclaimed her brother, surprised but secretly delighted. "But I thought they had gone for some days?"

"So did Chloe. But apparently Denzil had had enough of it by this morning, and said he must leave, because he was taking Chloe to the Russian dancers this evening."

"Is she dining here, or with him, then?"

"Here," replied Rosalind with a rather curious intonation. "It appears that they are not going to the Russian dancers after all—nor anywhere else."

"But why not?" queried Hilary, stopping in his unfolding of *The Times*. "If that was what they came back for?"

"It seems that Denzil has changed his mind again," responded Rosalind dryly. "Chloe was expecting to go, but about two o'clock he rang up and said he was sorry, but he couldn't take her."

"But, hang it all, *why?*" reiterated Hilary, more and more astonished. "Is he ill, or what?"

"I don't know. I gather that he gave no reason. He can't have said much, for she wasn't at the telephone for more than a minute."

"But how extraordinary! Was Chloe upset?"

"Not exactly; but I think she was a trifle hurt—or perhaps only disappointed. She went out after that to do some shopping, and then to the nursing-home to see her aunt. She had tea there, and hasn't been home long, so I have hardly seen her. I hope there's nothing wrong between her and Denzil?"

"But you rather think there may be," said Hilary in a slightly defiant tone. "You feel, I suppose, that this confirms what you said to me yesterday about them?"

"Well, I don't think it sounds quite happy," replied Rosalind gently. "Why couldn't Denzil give his reason for disappointing her, if it's a valid one?"

"He may have a perfectly valid reason for not giving a reason," answered Hilary almost crossly. "But don't you think, Rose, that I ought to offer to take her to the Russian dancers this evening, that is, if I can get tickets at such short notice? Or would that look . . ." He paused.

"Yes, on the whole I think it might," agreed Mrs. Fortescue, taking his meaning. "Better leave it alone, I think. I must go up to that boy now."

Hilary at last sat down and opened the paper, but he did not read it. Really this was becoming worrying! What *was* Denzil thinking of? There was only one possible excuse for this strange conduct, and that was, that he was feeling ill and would not admit it . . . and that was worrying too.

Presently the door opened and admitted Chloe herself, carrying a book.

"Good evening, Hilary! I'm back, as you see. I wish you wouldn't get up! I'm not going out this evening after all, so I shall be able to get on with *The Lesser Glory* before dinner." She seemed quite gay and contented, and laughed indeed, as she added, settling herself on the other side of the fire, "That does sound as if I don't want to talk, and I didn't mean that! But don't let me take you from your paper."

She put her feet on the firestool and opened her book with a smile. So Hilary, after a word or two, obeyed her and returned to *The Times*. But with a very little manœuvring he could pretend to be reading it and yet see her quite well, and he soon discovered that, like himself, she was not really reading. In fact the book was very soon on her lap, and she was staring into the fire with a troubled expression which he had never seen on her face before. As he did not like any longer to observe her in this clandestine fashion he put down his paper.

"Do forgive me, Chloe, but is anything worrying you?" He half repented his boldness the moment he had spoken.

Chloe turned her blue eyes on him. There were faint shadows beneath them; he had never noticed any there before. "Yes," she admitted, "though I dare say it's silly. I'm a little worried about Denzil."

"You mean that he's not well? Is that why he's not taking you out this evening? Rosalind has just told me about that."

"No, he didn't give any reason; he only said he was frightfully sorry that he couldn't. But that isn't exactly what I meant, though I do think that the last few days he has

been looking far from well. I meant that he seems . . . not like himself, somehow, nowadays. I don't know if you have noticed it?"

Hilary put *The Times* aside altogether. "I have, as a matter of fact. But I cannot think of any cause for it unless he is feeling physically a bit under the weather."

At that the girl looked rather alarmed. "You mean that you think he is ill—that he ought to see a doctor? Has he said anything to you about it?"

"Not a word. And as to seeing a doctor, it's never been very easy to get him to do that. But I expect it's not necessary." Hilary hesitated a moment, and then decided that he *would* say it. "If you don't mind my saying so, Chloe, you mustn't take Denzil's variations of mood—because he does vary—too seriously. They are the penalty which he has to pay, I suppose, for his mental gifts. I don't mean that there's anything in the least wrong with his nerves—he couldn't climb and fence as he does if there were—but they are undoubtedly tuned up to a higher pitch than those of an ordinary mortal like myself, and one has to allow for that."

"I don't call you a bit ordinary, Hilary," said Chloe softly and most unexpectedly. "You are—well, I won't say what is in my mind about you, but I'll tell you some day . . . and tell you too what Denzil once said to me about you." And, as Hilary at once looked uncomfortable, she smiled and added, "Don't be frightened—I said 'some day.' But to return to Denzil," she went on, serious again. "I couldn't say this to anyone in the world except you, but as you know Denzil so well you may be able to help me. What is worrying me is the change in him—*himself*—if you know what I mean? He really has changed a lot. When I first knew him he was . . . quite different." She

sighed suddenly, and, resting her chin on her hand, stared into the fire.

This confidence was fairly staggering, for it went much farther than anything Rosalind had hinted at. It was indeed an embarrassing compliment that was being paid to Hilary, for, feeling as he was aware now that he did feel towards the girl who had looked at him so appealingly, it was more than difficult for him to adjudicate or give counsel on the delicate matter of her relations with her fiancé—his best friend.

"How do you mean, 'different'?" he got out awkwardly.

"Well," said Chloe, lifting her head and speaking with evident constraint, "he seems so restless and so easily put out. He used not to be. Nearly everybody seems to get on his nerves—I'm sure I do. Of course sometimes he is as he used to be . . . but hardly at all the last few days. I can't help feeling that the change must be my fault. Naturally I know quite well that I'm not nearly clever enough for him, so *that* perhaps—"

"My dear Chloe!" cried Hilary, quite abashed at such simple humility in one who, after all, in no sense stood in the position of the beggar girl to King Cophetua, "my dear Chloe, what a preposterous idea! Of course it's not your fault! And as to not being 'clever' enough, you can dismiss such an absurd idea from your mind at once! Don't you know that Denzil is most deeply in love with you?"

Chloe gave a little sigh. "Yes, I think he is . . . but it doesn't seem to make him happy. I *know* he's not happy. Now this week-end, for instance . . . it wasn't really at all comfortable, and I seemed somehow to be always saying the wrong thing."

"I can't believe that," said Hilary hotly. "It simply

cannot be anything to do with you. You admit that *everybody* gets on his nerves. Didn't his uncle, for instance?"

"I suppose he did, for frankly Denzil wasn't very nice to him. Sir John isn't particularly interesting, certainly, but he was very kind, and I don't think Denzil ought to have been so impatient with him. But he didn't like it at all when I told him so." She gave a rueful little laugh. "I wasn't altogether sorry when he announced that we were coming back this——"

"Mr. Milburn to see Miss Pagel" announced Hester the parlourmaid, opening the door with her accustomed abruptness and bravura.

Astonished, and, in Hilary's case, annoyed, both Chloe and he got up as Mr. Claude Milburn, in a dinner jacket, his black hair more glossy than ever under the electric light, came forward.

"I hope you will excuse this sudden irruption," he said, when greetings were over. "I happened to go to see Aunt Emily at the nursing home after tea—I must just have missed you there, Chloe—and she told me that your . . . usual escort had—that he would not be available this evening. I tried twice to telephone to you, but the line appeared to be engaged or out of order, so I dressed and came round as quickly as I could, to see if I could persuade you to dine with me somewhere and go to a theatre afterwards. I could not get tickets for the Russian dancers."

Chloe had flushed quite brightly. "Oh, Claude, how very kind of you!"

"You'll come then?" said her cousin in a tone of satisfaction. "We can discuss the question of the theatre as we go, and I will telephone for seats from the restaurant."

But things were not going to be as easy for Mr. Milburn as that. "If you don't mind, Claude, I don't think I'll come,

all the same," said Chloe. "You see, I had quite settled down to a quiet evening at home."

"Oh, I can't accept that as an excuse!" protested the visitor, though his face had fallen. "After all, you were originally going out this evening. Why not give me the pleasure of taking you for once? Do come, Chloe!"

But Chloe, though she looked distressed, and her cheeks were still flushed, stuck to her guns. "I am *so* sorry you should have come for nothing, Claude, but I'd really rather not."

Hilary glanced from one to the other. It was quite plain that for some unexplained reason Chloe honestly did not want to accept her cousin's invitation, but he could not help thinking what an exceptionally sweet-tempered girl she must be to let slip this opportunity of scoring off the lover who had failed her. Meanwhile he asked Mr. Milburn to sit down, which the latter did with none too good a grace, and the involuntary host tried to ease the situation.

"I am so sorry there was difficulty about the telephone, Mr. Milburn. I can't understand the line being engaged, for I don't think any one has been using it."

"Perhaps there is something wrong with my telephone, then," said Milburn grumpily. Eyeing Chloe for a moment, he shot out, "What's happened to Folyat this evening?"

"He wasn't able to come," answered Chloe, pink once more, but with a certain dignity. "—How did you think Aunt Emily seemed, Claude?"

While Mr. Milburn unwillingly followed this red herring, Hilary began to wonder uncomfortably whether he ought to ask him to stay to dinner. It was the last thing he wanted to do, for he was now looking forward to an evening *à trois*. Besides, what about Rosalind's house-keeping? He would have to go up to Quentin's bedside

and consult her first. But it did begin to look as if Milburn intended to sit tight and force him to this unwilling act of hospitality, for, planted stiffly and not at all debonairly in the armchair opposite Chloe, he was now rather sulkily answering some question about hunting.

"Yes, I've had one or two fairly decent days with the Whaddon Chase, and the day after to-morrow I am going down to Staneley Court again. My friend Jervis has been urging me to have a few days with the Heythrop, as my last attempt was such a fiasco."

"Why was it such a fiasco?" enquired his cousin. "I hope you didn't ride over a hound?"

The pleasantry was not well received, for Mr. Milburn, far from smiling, took no notice of it at all. "It was in the first week of February," he explained "and we never got out at all, what with frost and then that confounded snowstorm.—But you have an uncommonly bad memory, Chloe, or else you don't read my letters, because I told you about it at the time."

"Letters! Told me about it?" exclaimed the girl.

"When I wrote to you from Staneley Court. You know the letter I mean," he added, rather significantly.

Chloe looked blank. "But I don't remember any letter! *Did* you write to me from—what is the name of the place? Staneley? What about?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. Still, I think you would have remembered the letter if you had received it. Are you sure you did not?"

"Absolutely certain. I haven't had a letter from you for ages! It must have gone astray."

Mr. Milburn's annoyed expression deepened. "That's exceedingly tiresome! I specially wanted you to have it."

"Then it *was* important!" exclaimed Chloe, with some

logic. "I wonder what can have happened to it? Letters don't often get lost, do they?"

Here Hilary rather belatedly offered the visitor the cigarettes. He took one and was just about to strike a match when he stopped, and, taking the cigarette out of his mouth, turned to Hilary and exclaimed:

"But of course! There was a fatal accident to the postman in that very snowstorm, wasn't there? You yourself, Mr. Severn, mentioned it to me in the train that day coming back from the International football match! You were interested, I remember, because you knew the man. I posted my letter before leaving Staneley on the Wednesday. If that was the day he was lost in the snow, I suppose that might account for the non-delivery of my letter."

"Hardly," replied Hilary, "although Wednesday was the very day, because as a matter of fact when the poor fellow was found under the snow, his bag of letters was with him in the drift, and I was told that they would be delivered, though naturally delayed."

"My letter, apparently, being the exception," observed Milburn. He lit up, shook out the match, and then said, "I wonder why?"

"Here's another mystery in connection with poor Jenner's fate!" remarked Chloe, turning with a smile to Hilary. "A pity that Quentin isn't here!"

"Another mystery? What was the first mystery, then?" enquired her cousin.

"It isn't really a mystery," explained Hilary. "It's only that the postman's widow took it into her head that his death wasn't due to an accident—an idea which was found to have no foundation whatever. And I don't think," he went on, "that there is much mystery about the non-delivery of your letter either, Mr. Milburn, if you come to think

of it. I didn't hear for certain that *all* the letters in his bag were delivered, and some of them may easily have got too wet for the address on the envelope, or even the address of the sender, to be deciphered."

Milburn nodded, but appeared to cogitate.

"I wonder if my letter really was in that particular bag?" he said reflectively after a moment. "I posted it myself in the box by the east gate of Staneley Court in the early afternoon."

"Yes, it must have been," answered Hilary. "The next collection there, at half-past five, was the last poor Jenner made, as it happens."

"M-m," said the guest. "What made the postman's widow imagine, Mr. Severn, that his death was not due to an accident?"

"Oh, some tale of an old enemy," said Hilary carelessly, in the tone of one who is not going to embark upon a subject.

"Mr. Severn has taken so much trouble to set the poor woman's mind at rest," observed Chloe. "It is owing to him that that unfortunate idea of hers is disposed of now.—Have you read *The Lesser Glory* yet, Claude?" she asked, holding it up.

At that moment, with the same paralysing suddenness, Hester announced "Mr. Folyat."

Whether the surprise caused by the arrival of this second unexpected visitor (also clad in a dinner jacket) was greater or less than that aroused by the first it is difficult to say. Chloe jumped up and went to meet him.

"Oh, Denzil, so you've come after all!" There was no reproach in her tone.

"Yes, I found in the end that I could manage it," replied

her betrothed as he kissed her. "—Good evening, Hilary.—You can tell me what you think of my behaviour afterwards," he said, smiling down at Chloe, "but now, like a dear, go up and dress as quickly as you can. We have just got time for dinner first."

For a moment Chloe hesitated, glancing towards the arm-chair by the fire, whose occupant, his back to the door, had neither risen nor even turned his head. Then she laughed. "I suppose I must obey orders, but you've got me into rather a hole, Denzil, for here's Claude, who wanted me to go with him instead—and I refused!"

Milburn on this rose to his feet, and turned round, becoming for the first time visible to Folyat. They looked at each other.

"However," finished Chloe lightly, "it's your fault, and so I shall leave you to square him." And she was gone.

"It's hardly a question of 'squaring' Mr. Milburn," coldly remarked Denzil—presumably to Hilary, "since he must be aware that mine was the prior engagement.—May I ask, Milburn, how you came to think that Chloe would not be going out with me to-night?"

"From my visit to my aunt, Lady Monckton, this evening," responded that gentleman promptly, "where I learnt that you had thrown her over."

"Only I am sure Miss Page never used that expression," said Hilary with some haste.

"I don't say she did," replied Claude Milburn. He paused a second, and then added with deliberation, "But I use it."

"Inaccurately, however, as you see," retorted Folyat with a distinctly unpleasant smile. He turned his shoulder, almost his back, upon him, as he accepted a cigarette from Hilary, and then as if there were but the two of them in the room, began to talk to him about the

prospects of Oxford in the Boat Race.

Hilary was supremely uncomfortable, aware as he was of Milburn, brimming with hostility, in the background. Why the deuce didn't he leave now, instead of seething there! . . . But how sweet of Chloe to agree to accompany Denzil at the eleventh hour like this, without a shadow of resentment or a demand for an explanation! Denzil himself (looking, however, rather odd) continued to hold Hilary against his will in conversation as if he were completely unaware of Milburn's presence. Hilary did not admire him for doing this (and putting him as host in an awkward position) but he could not help admiring the masterly way he did it. That a devil visited Denzil at times he knew well; but to harbour it at this moment meant an explosion of some kind.

The explosion came. It was Denzil himself who supplied the necessary spark when, pulling out his watch, he said, though not impatiently, "I hope Chloe won't be long!" . . . for on that Milburn instantly came round Hilary and planted himself squarely in front of Folyat, his dark, smooth face almost livid with rage.

"You 'hope Chloe won't be long!'" he burst out. "What do you think you are—marching in at the last moment after leaving her in the lurch and then expecting her to run to your whistle like a dog—a pasha with a slave-girl? Your attitude towards my cousin is intolerable! The General should have listened to my warning . . . but you were too well off, and Chloe, poor child, was fascinated by you! And you trade on that to treat her in a way you probably didn't dare to treat your cast-off mistress in France . . . if indeed Madame d'Azelles is cast-off!"

Had he fired off a pistol in Mrs. Fortescue's drawing-room Claude Milburn could hardly have obtained a more

shattering result. Only, instead of a deafening report, there was dead silence—till Hilary, in a horrified voice, broke it.

"Milburn, what are you saying!"

At that Milburn turned on him with almost equal fury.

"Don't pretend, Severn, that you, an intimate friend, know nothing of that liaison—a matter of such common knowledge round Taillefontaine that a mere casual visitor could not avoid learning of it."

As for Folyat, the accusation seemed to have smitten him into complete immobility—his face, too, could no more be read than if he had been wearing that close-meshed fencing mask of Thursday night. But he spoke at last.

"You know perfectly well," he said, in a voice steely with contempt, "that my relations with that lady came to an end nearly a couple of years ago, and that I have never seen her nor had any communication with her since!"

But he had scarcely finished speaking before Hilary, petrified though he was, had got himself to the door. At all costs Chloe must be stopped from coming in on this! As he turned the handle he heard Milburn saying, "I don't 'know perfectly well'! I have only your word for——"

Then Hilary was outside in the hall, the drawing-room door tightly shut behind him . . . and there was Chloe running down the stairs, her cloak trailing over one arm, trying to fasten a bracelet as she came. He was only just in time. He felt cold all over.

"Here I am!" said the girl rather breathlessly. "I've been as quick as I could. Oh, bother!" On the bottom stair she stopped and grabbed at her necklace. "I can't have fastened the catch of this thing properly." Indeed the single row of pearls—Denzil's gift—hung limp from her hand.

Hilary left his post. "Might I—do you think I could fasten it for you?"

"Would you? It's rather difficult; but if you don't mind trying . . ." She came down the remaining step and turned her back, holding the two ends of the necklace towards him on either side of her slender neck.

Hilary's hands were far from steady, but he managed to engage the catch securely in the clasp of brilliants. At any other time he would have been only too vividly aware of her nearness, of the little clustering curls which brushed his fingers, but his attention now was nailed to quite another matter, and, his task accomplished, he stepped between Chloe and the drawing-room door again.

"If you'll wait here—you've still got your cloak to put on, I see—I'll tell Denzil you're ready. Don't bother to go in there."

He had tried to make his recommendation sound perfectly casual, but evidently had not quite succeeded. "Why not," said Chloe quickly, glanced at him and immediately asked, with sudden apprehension in her voice: "Hilary, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing much; they have only got across each other a little, and they would feel awkward, you know, if you went in. Let's come away from the door." And taking her elbow he gently drew her farther away into the little hall. If only Rosalind didn't take it into her head to come downstairs at this juncture!

Chloe let him draw her away, and then stood looking up at him, under the central light, with every vestige of animation beaten out of her face. "Oh, Hilary, I was afraid of it, after I'd gone upstairs! They do dislike each other so! I did hurry, frightfully, so as to get back before anything happened!" And indeed the young man saw now that her pretty lace frock looked, even to a masculine eye, as if it had been very hastily put on, and that her hair was

not so immaculately neat and shining as usual. "I oughtn't to have said that about squaring Claude—I oughtn't to have let Denzil know he had come for me!"

Hilary suddenly found himself holding both her hands in reassurance.

"Really it's nothing to worry about," he lied. "They're not throwing chairs at each other or anything of that sort!" (At least he hoped they were not!) "And what you said made no difference, for of course Denzil had to know sooner or later that your cousin had come to ask you to go with him. Let me put your cloak on for you, and then I'll tell Denzil that you are ready."

He loosed her hands, took the cloak of fur and brocade, and was just going to deposit it on her shoulders, when the drawing-room door opened sharply and Milburn came out. He checked a moment as he saw the two in the hall, and then came on again.

"Good night, Severn; I'll be off now. Good-bye, Chloe—I hope you'll enjoy your evening!" Snatching up his coat and hat, and flinging his white scarf round his neck, he let himself out of the hall door with no more preparation than that, and banged it behind him. "Thank the Lord!" thought Hilary, standing with the cloak in his hands.

The banging of the hall door must have masked Denzil's exit from the drawing-room, for both Chloe and her companion started a little as his voice sounded behind them, unemotional, even gentle. "You've hurried, Chloe, I'm afraid. It's my fault. I'm so sorry!" He picked up and put on his coat, and added, as she looked at him mutely, "While you're getting into your cloak I'll secure a taxi." Then he too opened the hall door and vanished, leaving it ajar.

Chloe's gaze turned to Hilary; the colour was coming

back to her face. "Denzil seems . . . all right."

"I told you it wasn't anything to worry about," replied Hilary, re-enforcing his lie by a sort of smile. Her obvious relief at Folyat's mildness made her pathetic in his eyes. He put the cloak carefully about her shoulders, went to the hall door for a moment and then came back. "You might go now; but wrap that affair tight round you—it's cold." And with extra care he shepherded her down the steps to the taxi just come to a standstill at the gate.

"I hope," said Rosalind, "—dear me, dinner's late—that it was all right my not putting in an appearance? Hester told me that Mr. Milburn had come for Chloe. I'm so glad that she was able to go out this evening after all. But I wonder," and she smiled rather mischievously, "what Master Denzil will say when he hears of it!"

Hilary, standing turning over the leaves of Chloe's novel, hesitated for a second or two. Then he put it down. "He *has* heard . . . and said. He arrived a little later. Didn't you know? And it's with him that Chloe has gone out."

His sister's mouth positively fell open.

"*Well!*" she ejaculated; and into that monosyllable contrived to pack such a world of meaning that Hilary could not help breaking into a laugh just as Hester assaulted the drawing room door for the third time that evening, and announced with spirit that dinner was served.

CHAPTER TEN

DENZIL's note was sent next day by special messenger to the War Office.

Dear Hilary: Can you come round and see me about nine o'clock this evening? I think we must have a talk. I can't give you dinner, as my man will be out, but I shall be back from my club by then. If you cannot manage it, ring me up and we will fix another time. Yours, D.F.

Hilary excused himself after dinner to his sister and Chloe without saying where he was going. At Gloucester Road Tube Station he just missed, as usual, the alternate train which stopped there, and had to wait while the non-stop roared through. Walking up and down the platform in that desiccated air he faced once more the astonishing piece of information about his friend which Milburn, of all people, possessed, and had not scrupled to reveal in so outrageous a manner last night. And the charge must be true; Denzil had practically admitted it. But that his intrigue with this Frenchwoman had ended completely and absolutely, as he had declared, long before he became engaged to Chloe Page, Hilary never doubted for an instant. Denzil was not that sort!

But then he had never thought him—the cold, fastidious Denzil—the sort who would have had a mistress at all. How little one knew!

The train whizzed noisily in at last, and bore him noisily out. Seated in its screaming, brilliantly lit interior,

crammed with faces, Hilary tried to get to the root of his own deep discomfort. It was not really the discovery that Denzil was so much less impervious to women than he had believed him, but the shock of finding that he knew so little about his closest friend. He had known Folyat so long and, as he thought, so intimately, and yet he had never heard a syllable about this woman in France. But then, after all, Denzil was not obliged to tell him about an affair of the sort which a man usually keeps to himself! Of course not, and Hilary had always accepted reserves in him; yet all the same he could not prevent himself from feeling as if a door had been shut in his face. No, that was wrong; it was rather as if he had come upon a barred door where he had not known that any door existed. Wasn't there a French idiom about finding a shut door, so telling that he had actually remembered it from his schooldays—"trouver visage de bois"? Well, that was what he had done!

As he passed the porter's box in the vestibule of the flats off St. James's Street the man, who knew Hilary well by sight, stopped him and handed him a latchkey which he said Mr. Folyat had left in case he himself were not back before his arrival. Besides, the porter intimated, even if Mr. Folyat were back it would be no good Mr. Severn ringing, because the electric bells up there had gone out of order this evening.

Denzil's flat, on the knocker of which was fastened a notice about the bell, was in darkness; its owner was not yet back. Hilary hung up his coat and hat and went into the sitting-room which he knew so well, which yet had held a secret he had never dreamt of—that woman's photograph, perhaps, or her letters . . . no doubt destroyed now. But to the eye everything in the spacious, distinguished-

looking room was as usual, save for the incongruous note struck by the presence of the legacy from Denzil's great-aunt to which Chloe had put in a claim on the day when Hilary had first met her. The ugly plated contours of the épergne, among surroundings which so reflected Folyat's own austere and individual taste, were quite startling; and considering how uncompromising he was in the matter of what he disliked, how intolerant of even the second-rate, his keeping of that "extraordinarily repulsive object," as he had termed it, in a place where it must constantly meet his eye had a significance out of all proportion to its mere presence there. Hilary was not slow to recognise that.

He went and sat down inertly by the fire. Over the mantelpiece hung the lovely little unknown master which Denzil had picked up some years ago in Italy. From her elaborate frame of twined pomegranates, dulled with age, the girl martyr smiled down at him. He knew her well in her green robe, with the palm branch and the tower in the blue, climbing background which marked her as Saint Barbara. And for the first time he fancied that he saw in the young, serene face, the golden hair escaping from the mesh of its jewelled net, a likeness to Chloe Page.

On that the thought of Chloe swamped him with pain. What about *her* in all this? However past and done with, this French affair of Denzil's, it was, to his mind—an old-fashioned mind, as he was well aware—a detraction from the perfect homage which was due to anyone so untouched. Had Chloe herself any inkling of it? No, he was certain she had not. Though from their talk yesterday evening he knew that she was distressed about the "change" in Denzil (attributing it, poor little darling, in some way to herself) she could surely suspect nothing of that sort—and he hoped she never would.

He roused himself as he heard the door of the flat bang, and was on his feet when the sitting-room door opened and Folyat came into the room.

"I hope you haven't been here long?" he said with an air of concern. "I was buttonholed just as I was getting away. Had a drink?"

"Barely five minutes. No, I won't have one just yet, thanks." He sat down again.

Folyat came over and stood on the hearthrug. He went straight to the point, as he usually did.

"I am very sorry you had this bit of news about me sprung on you like that yesterday evening, Hilary."

"It was an abominable thing of that fellow Milburn to do!" answered Hilary with warmth.

"But are you sure," asked Folyat, eyeing him a shade defiantly, "that you are not applying that epithet to the conduct of the wrong person? After all, if there had been no tales to tell of me, he couldn't have told any."

Hilary took himself in hand. "My dear Denzil, your private affairs are—your private affairs. I admit that to learn of the existence of this lady in your life was a surprise, perhaps rather a shock to me. But I know that what Milburn hinted at—that the affair was still going on—is impossible."

"I thank you for the testimonial!" returned Folyat in his most flippant manner. Then it suddenly left him. "You have my word of honour, Hilary, that I have neither seen nor corresponded with the lady in question since the summer before last—nearly two years ago. We definitely parted then. You do believe that?"

"I believed you last night. If I hadn't . . . I don't know that I should be here now."

Folyat looked at him rather curiously, but said nothing,

and Hilary, not wishing to amplify or discuss his own last statement, asked hastily, "How did Milburn get to know?"

"By a most unlikely chance, which he has contrived to make the most of—damn him! I'd better tell you the whole story quite briefly."

Having altered the lighting of the room to his satisfaction Folyat sat down in the armchair on the other side of the fire.

"I got to know Madame d'Azelles—since you have heard her name already—about five years ago, when I was climbing in the Dolomites. I don't mean that I met her on a mountain peak; she was staying at Cortina. She was a Frenchwoman of great charm and intelligence, whose husband had died some years previously and left her a small property at Tallefontaine, near Blois. We became friends, nothing more. Next time I was over on the Continent I went to Tallefontaine and called upon her. We soon found that we did want to become more than friends, but she did not wish to marry again and leave France. I used to go and stay there, either with her or near her, from time to time—I don't know whether you noticed that between 1928 and 1931 my visits to France were more frequent than either before or since. I never felt like telling you, Hilary, at the time; and when it was all over there seemed still less reason for doing so."

("Three years!" thought Hilary.) But he said, "Why should you? It was no concern of mine. Only I wish I . . . had not learnt it just like that."

Folyat's face darkened. "You can't wish it more than I do."

"How did Milburn learn of it? Can you guess?"

"I don't need to guess. I know. He told me—yes, I had this out with him a couple of months ago, damned inter-

fering hypocrite that he is, and I thought—" He pulled himself up, and resumed, in the same quick, almost matter-of-fact tone:

"About three years ago he was motoring in Touraine and, as bad luck would have it, struck up acquaintance, over some mishap on the road, I think, with a family living at Taillefontaine. He was staying at Blois at the time, and they insisted on his coming out to Taillefontaine for the day. When he was there—it is quite a small place—he happened to see Madame d'Azelles and me come out from the avenue of her little property, and made some remark about us to his hosts. I don't doubt there was gossip in Taillefontaine; we had chosen our line quite deliberately. Milburn was told the facts, though not my name—probably his informants couldn't pronounce it. Later on, in London, it appears that he saw me somewhere, recognised and identified me—that must have been about the time, ironically enough, when Madame d'Azelles and I decided to part.

"Then last autumn he learnt that his cousin Chloe Page had met me; then that we were seeing a good deal of each other. As Chloe would have none of him, he resolved to use what he had learnt of this past affair of mine as a weapon to prevent the engagement which he feared was imminent; he therefore went to General Page and told him about my relations with Madame d'Azelles. Now if I thought that Claude Milburn himself had lived like a hermit in the Alexandrian desert," said Folyat with a sort of wry anger, "I might have forgiven, even respected him; but that, as I know, was not the case—and yet *he* would have married Chloe if he could! However, he failed in his attempt to set the General against me, although he—the General, I mean—did tackle me (unwillingly enough)

on the subject . . . very much in the vein of 'as one man of the world to another'; you know the style! I gave him my word that it had all come absolutely to an end long before I ever met his daughter. It was an odd interview"—there was a shade of distaste in Folyat's voice, "because the old boy was not at all the outraged parent; he was only too anxious to be reassured.

"Milburn, however, was quite another matter. I went and asked him what the hell he meant by interfering in my private affairs, and how he had found the means to do so. He told me quite frankly. However, he had shot his bolt and failed . . . and not long afterwards Chloe consented to become my wife."

In the short silence that ensued there came back into Hilary's mind, not by any means for the first time, the memory of that afternoon at Lincott Manor. Milburn had been there too; no wonder the atmosphere had been strained. And what about that mysterious note of his?

"That day you took me to the General's—had that letter which Milburn——"

"Yes, it had to do with it, damn him!" said Folyat, not waiting for Hilary to finish. He looked for an instant as if he saw Milburn himself in front of him; then the expression left his face and he rose.

"Now that I have got my confession over, won't you have a drink?"

Hilary nodded. Watching Denzil busy with a decanter he said thoughtfully, "I suppose you are satisfied that he won't—no, he *couldn't* do such a thing!—that he won't tell Chloe about . . . Madame d'Azelles?"

Folyat's hand jerked a little on the siphon tap. "That is just what he . . . half threatened to do in that note,

but"—as Hilary uttered an exclamation—"on my writing to remonstrate he must have realised that such an action would be . . . what I said it was . . . and he undertook to keep silence."

"That's something, at any rate," said Hilary, accepting the glass. "But he went very near it last night, all the same! I was terrified lest Chloe should come into the room and overhear something—which she might have done at any moment. That was why I bolted out to do sentry."

"I guessed as much. It was very good of you. Naturally I did not wish her to learn about Madame d'Azelles from him, nor in that way. Not," added Folyat, with a change of tone to the casual, "that I think the actual knowledge would make any difference to her feelings for me—at least I hope not." And with that he brought his own glass to the fire, set it on the high mantelshef beneath Saint Barbara, and stood looking down into the flames.

Hilary said nothing for a moment; he was puzzled. There had sounded in that last almost jaunty assertion a note totally unlike the Denzil Folyat whom he knew, a note so completely at variance with the almost virulent resentment which he had just displayed against Milburn that he did not know what to make of it. Moreover . . . *wouldn't* it make any difference to Chloe, who was so unlike, so beautifully unlike some modern girls, to whom, at least in fiction, an affair before marriage appeared to cause little heartburning? And Denzil must know her far better than he did—how could he then not fear that if she came to learn about this Frenchwoman she would suffer at least some measure of disillusionment? He must fear it, really; he had just said what he had said to encourage himself . . . for perhaps he was actually contemplating telling her!

He was certainly looking grave enough now—more than grave—as he stood there, staring down into the fire, his untouched glass on the shelf at shoulder level. Seen from where Hilary sat below him, his face in the firelight seemed almost the face of a stranger, with something of that expression upon it which had so disturbed Hilary at the fencing display. Again he felt uneasy.

“Denzil,” he said suddenly, “do you mind if I ask you why you put off Chloe last night and then—thought better of it? It was rather unfortunate, as it turned out.”

Denzil left the hearth and began to walk up and down. “I’m afraid the reason will sound very inadequate,” he replied after a moment, “but I won’t make a secret of it from you. It is that I was . . . worried about something . . . and got myself worked up into a regular black mood, as I do sometimes, worse luck, and felt that I wasn’t fit company for anyone . . . least of all for her. In fact I behaved like an hysterical fool. Then I came to my senses—in part—and realised that Chloe’s was just the society I wanted, in which I was right. But what happened at your house should certainly be a warning to me not to indulge these fancies, for if I hadn’t, that skunk Milburn would have had no excuse for trying to supply my place. What a loss that we no longer live in the days when a man like that could be called out!” His tone was really savage.

“But you’ve drawn his teeth,” said Hilary, twisting round in his chair to look at him. “That is, if you can rely on his keeping his promise of silence?”

Denzil did not answer. He came and threw himself down in his chair again. Glancing anew at his face, Hilary said to himself, “He has just stated that the cause of his desertion of Chloe yesterday was not to be kept a secret from me, but it has been, because he hasn’t gone back

far enough—he hasn't told me *what* was worrying him to such an extent! Rosalind was right; I don't believe he is happy about his engagement. But now, of course"—a sudden illumination visited him—"I have in all probability the key to what is making him unhappy! It is the remembrance of this affair in Touraine. Whatever he may say, he does mind Chloe hearing of it . . . and possibly he minds almost equally her being in ignorance of it! And as long as Milburn knows of it he can't feel safe. I believe that what is bothering him is that he can't make up his mind whether to tell Chloe or no!"

"Well, let's talk of something else," said Denzil, appearing all at once to shake off his preoccupation, and getting up to take his glass off the mantelshelf. "Finance, for a change. If you have any money to invest, Hilary, let me beg you not to put it into Wallbrick Consolidated!"

"Why not?—Not that I have any money to invest."

"Because I met a 'financier' a day or two ago, and he advised me, almost with tears in his eyes, to put every penny I could lay hands on into it, that's why!" replied Folyat, with quite his old cynical smile, as he lifted the tumbler off the mantelpiece and prepared to sit down again.

The glass, however, never reached his lips, nor he the chair. There came at that instant a sharp rat-tat at the outer door of the flat. It startled Folyat (unaccustomed, presumably, to the use of the knocker); he turned as though to see the source of it, and caught his glass, with a clumsiness most unusual in him, against the corner of the mantelshelf, with the result that it was jerked from his hand and crashed straight on to the hearth.

He drew his breath sharply. "Good Lord! what a clumsy ass I am!" And he stared down with dismay at

the flooded and glass-strewn tiles.

"Shall I ring for your man?" suggested Hilary, looking for the bell. "Oh, no use, of course—he's out, isn't he?"

"Yes, and the bells are out of order—that's the reason for that infernal tattoo!—Good God, not again!" exclaimed Folyat angrily, as the knocker was plied once more with vigour.

"It's probably the postman with a registered letter or something," observed Hilary, getting out of his chair. "Shall I go and see?"

Folyat had faced round from the hearth. For a second he did not answer. Then he threw back his head for all the world as if he were taking a decision of importance. "Yes, go and take it from him, like a good fellow," he said, "while I get a towel to mop up this mess." Swinging round, he disappeared into his bedroom, which opened off the sitting-room.

Hilary went obediently to the door of the flat. There stood indeed the postman, holding out a registered letter, and the little green slip for its recipient to sign. "As Mr. Folyat is in he'd better attend to this himself," quoth his deputy, accepting also the stub of pencil tendered to him, and going back to the sitting-room. But as Denzil had not returned there he went in after him to his bedroom, prepared to suggest that a duster—if such could be found—would be better adapted to his purpose than a towel.

But Denzil had not even a towel in his hand, only a pocket-handkerchief; and this, as Hilary entered, holding out the receipt, he stuffed hastily into his pocket.

"It *was* a registered letter then? Chuck it there—oh, you haven't signed for it?" He took the slip and pencil very quickly, signed the paper rather illegibly on the dressing-table, commenting adversely upon the pencil, and

Hilary went back with the receipt to the waiting postman. Just as he was going to shut the door on him, a figure which he recognised as that of Denzil's manservant appeared on the landing and apologetically entered the flat.

"Is that you, Dawson?" called out his master from the sitting-room. "Bring something quickly to wipe up the whisky and water I've just spilt.—You're not going, Hilary?"

"It's later than I thought," returned Hilary, glancing at his watch. "I think I will, if you don't mind. I'd rather like to walk part of the way home."

Denzil came to the door of the flat with him. "Have I treated you badly by keeping you so entirely in the dark about . . . Taillefontaine?" he asked, with the rare gentleness which he could show when he chose. "I'm sorry if I have, Hilary—damnably sorry! Well, you know about it now . . . and why that Vouvray you gave me a few weeks ago brought back memories. But they are dead memories, which I wouldn't bring to life again now if I could. You believe that, don't you?"

Hilary did believe him, absolutely. It was not any fear that Denzil did not appreciate his present good fortune, or had any lingering regret for the *bonnes fortunes* of the past, which was disturbing him as he walked westwards under the Ritz arcades. He was engaged in trying to suppress two memories of his own; one, of that thrice-wretched Quentin embroidering the theme of what Jenner's supposed "murderer" would feel every time he heard the postman knock—an entirely absurd and childish idea, of course!—and the complementary one, a picture of Denzil a few minutes ago—not of Denzil, startled by the postman's knock, catching his tumbler so that it fell and broke (for

anyone with sensitive nerves taken unawares by that sudden clatter might easily jump—he wasn't sure that he hadn't done so himself) but of Denzil as he had come upon him in his bedroom, hastily withdrawing his handkerchief from his forehead.

There was only one reason why people mopped their foreheads . . . and it had not been hot in the flat.

Quentin's theory and Denzil's almost furtive action went with Hilary as far as Hyde Park Corner. Then he found to his relief that he was able to shake them off for what they were—rank absurdities, both of them.

For the rest of the way home his mind was occupied with this love affair of his friend's of which, during the three years that it had apparently lasted, he had not had the faintest suspicion.

The subject was occupying Hilary anew as, on the following evening, having elected to come home by bus, he walked down Gloucester Road from Palace Gate. When he got to the shops he saw to his surprise two familiar figures in front of an antique dealer's window. It was Denzil and his Chloe.

They were so engrossed that he was able to come up to them unperceived, as any other passer-by might have done. He stopped alongside and greeted them with, "Hallo! I gather that you are shopping!"

Denzil gave an almost imperceptible start. "Oh, hallo, Hilary!" he returned. "Left the treadmill? Yes, we're rather attracted by that wine-cooler. For 'Mon Abri,' you know."

"Denzil, you wretch!" protested Chloe on the other side. "He gives one ghastly name after another to our future home," she explained to Hilary. "But don't you think that

wine-cooler is tempting? Let's all go in and find out the price!"

They entered the shop, and after some parley Folyat bought the wine-cooler. While he was paying, Chloe, followed by Hilary, roamed about among the smaller antiques, mostly china and glass. "Some of these things look as if they belonged to the same period as that *épergne* which his old great-aunt left Denzil," remarked Chloe. "If I wanted 'Mon Abri'—I shall get into the habit of calling it that—to be really Victorian . . . which I don't, I should buy that pair of pink vases with gilding. Did you ever see anything so appalling? Oh! but look at *that*! How delightful! I must have it!"

"What—that little glass globe?"

"But, Hilary, don't you see what it is? One of those darling snow-scenes—'snowstorms,' we used to call them; I had one as a child. You turn them upside down and snow falls." She picked up the little globe. "Look, isn't it heavenly?"

She was like a child again, with a child's fresh rapture, as she held up the small, bright, round world wherein against a vividly but not gaudily painted background of spired pink church, brown hill, green pine-tree and blue sky stood, in the middle distance, the tiny figure of a woman in a scarlet dress with a kind of black scapular or stole over it. Chloe turned the world upside down, then back again, and instantly the air—or rather the liquid—within was thick with slowly falling white flakes.

"Isn't it adorable! I'm going to buy it!" she said, watching background and figure emerge again as the particles settled.

"I wish you'd let me give it you?" said Hilary. He had the feeling that by so doing he would somehow make for

himself a belated place in the childhood which had known just such another source of happiness.

At that moment Denzil came up. "What's that you have got hold of, Chloe?"

She gave a deft turn of the wrist, produced a perfect blizzard, and held up the globe. "It's a 'snowstorm'. Hilary is very kindly going to give it to me. I've wanted one for years."

Denzil stared down at the little snowfilled universe for an instant and then, to Hilary's amazement, his face darkened. "Oh, a toy!" he said, "and a rather foolish one at that! I shouldn't waste my money if I were you, Hilary!"

"It's not a waste if Chloe wants it," answered Hilary quietly, gently took the globe out of the girl's hand and walked back with it to the proprietor of the shop. How *could* Denzil put such a damper on Chloe's charming and spontaneous pleasure? No wonder she was beginning to think that she always did the wrong thing! Besides, ungraciousness of that sort was not characteristic of Denzil at all; what on earth was wrong with him?

But for the moment these questionings were very effectively dispelled by the shock of finding that he might have let himself in for a matter of five pounds or more had the "snowstorm" been a really genuine old "piece," and it was with thankfulness that he disbursed seven and sixpence for this modern reproduction, coming possibly from Prague or somewhere of the sort.

He did not present his gift to Chloe until they were back in the drawing-room at Ormiston Place. Denzil had left them at the gate, refusing an invitation to enter. He seemed, however, to have regained his equanimity. Fortunately Chloe's pleasure in her "snowstorm" had not, apparently, been destroyed, and she thanked Hilary most

warmly for his present. "If Denzil doesn't like it, I do!" she declared. "May we have it on the mantelpiece just for this evening, Mrs. Fortescue?"

"It shall stay there all the time if you like," said Rosalind.

Hilary did not read the letter in the unfamiliar handwriting which came for him at breakfast next morning; he merely glanced at the signature. To his disgusted surprise it was "Claude Milburn," and he shoved it immediately into his pocket. For one thing, he was not going to read it before Chloe.

All morning it lay like a coiled snake in his pocket—for he *knew* that it contained something unpleasant, and was not a mere note of apology for having caused something like a "scene" at Ormiston Place the other night. His morning's work at the War Office was not indeed so absorbing that he could not have run his eye over the missive; it was that he would not. But during lunch at his club he brought it out, braced to read against his will further "revelations" about Folyat's liaison.

Far from it! What he read, in a neat, almost beautiful handwriting, was this:

Dear Mr. Severn: I hope that in spite of the unfortunate developments of Monday evening, for my share in which I apologise, you will forgive me for reverting to our previous conversation about the postman Jenner, in whom you took an interest. The curious fact then emerged that, though the letters he was carrying at the time of his death are stated to have been recovered and delivered, one from me which should have been among them never reached its destined recipient—as you heard with your own ears.

That letter, it is true, contained nothing of importance,

but you are now in a position to appreciate the fact that there is one person who might be apprehensive of revelations to that same recipient, and had therefore a very strong motive for desiring to suppress my correspondence with her. And though that person was ostensibly in Ely at the time, may I point out that he possesses a fast and powerful car? As I understand that you had been concerning yourself with the suggestion of foul play made in connection with the postman's death, I leave it to you to follow up this clue should you so desire.

"Coffee, sir?" asked the waiter at Hilary's elbow, and had to cough and repeat the question to the gentleman staring 'as if he were struck' at the letter in his hand before he got an answer.

"Coffee? Yes, black."

It was to be hoped the coffee would steady him—would keep him from tearing there and then into little pieces this letter, more venomous even than he had dreamed, this letter with its vile, its impossible—its ludicrously impossible—insinuation! Hilary Severn had no real wish to do a melodramatic thing like that in his club.

But back in his room at the War Office, where his Assistant Principal had not yet arrived, he was able to gratify this desire, and thought, as he reduced the letter to fragments and watched them vanish in the fire, "There's an end of that wicked nonsense! Nonsense, because I *know* that on that Wednesday, the first of February, Denzil was at Ely. I had a letter from him next day on the hotel notepaper, and with the Ely postmark; nonsense, because he had no cause to fear revelations—hadn't Milburn promised him not to make them?—and anyhow he does not appear unduly exercised at the idea of Chloe's hearing about

the lady in Touraine; nonsense, finally, because it is beyond the bounds of possibility that, in Ely, he should have known there was a letter going to be written down in the Cotswolds and posted at a particular hour at a particular small letter-box, and then spirit himself down there—well over a hundred miles, probably, and exceedingly cross-country—in order to suppress it, slaying the postman in the process!”

And with that he plunged into work.

Yet five minutes later he was doing nothing with the taxpayers' time but stare at the report he was supposed to be writing, and think, “Good God! how I played into Milburn's hands when I told him that the letters had been found and delivered! If only I'd known I could have said they were all lost or irreparably damaged! And Chloe—who talked about a mystery, so that I had to admit there had been a suggestion of foul play. Between us we armed him to do this against Denzil . . .”

Chloe was going to dine and spend the evening with friends, so when Hilary got home he had but a brief glimpse of her before she went to dress. She was doing a jigsaw puzzle with Quentin, and was certified by that enthusiastic young gentleman to be “perfectly marvellous” especially with “those horrid grey bits.” Hilary helped for a little; it was something to find his hand turning over what appeared to be absolutely meaningless scraps of cardboard in close proximity to hers, and to be highly praised by her for contributing a long sought for and vital portion to a section of what appeared to be the interior of a power station. And when she went upstairs to dress it was as if a light had gone out of the room—as well as all the interest out of the jigsaw.

After Quentin had retired to bed and he and Rosalind had settled down for a quiet evening, Milburn's letter and its veiled accusation returned upon Hilary so forcibly that, for fear Rosalind should remark that he was not reading, and ask what was occupying his thoughts, he withdrew after a while to his den on pretext of writing a letter. More, lest Rosalind should come in, he seated himself at his writing table with a sheet of notepaper in front of him, on which his pen automatically wove a meaningless track of dots and hieroglyphics while his mind pursued a course as tortuous.

It was downright wicked to try to connect Denzil, his lifelong friend, with the tragedy at Charton—preposterous, absurd, criminal! And yet . . . and yet . . . the traitorous questionings came dancing round like the trolls in *Peer Gynt*. Why had Denzil been so discomfited at the postman's sudden knock—curse that boy! he himself would never have noticed that discomfiture but for Quentin's suggestion. Why was that one letter missing from Jenner's bag and no other—as far as was known? What was Denzil, on his own admission, worrying about, worrying to the extent of being quite unlike himself, just when he ought to be at his happiest with Chloe? Surely something more than this dead and gone liaison? Chloe herself had actually been driven to confide in him about the change in Denzil. Was it conceivable that Denzil *had* become involved in some way—of course innocently—with Jenner's fate?

If so, would that not explain his really rather curious attitude towards the whole Jenner problem, alternating between what appeared to be a lack of interest and an almost savage irritation? Apart from his short letter from Lincott Manor, he had never shown Hilary the sympathy which in their long friendship had always been forthcoming in any

matter which touched him at all nearly. And—a rather uncomfortable thought, which seemed to bring the whole far-fetched idea much closer—was that why he had shown such unkind distaste for Chloe's 'snowstorm?' Was *that* why?

Hilary got up and began to walk distractedly about the room. Denzil, *Denzil* connected with Jenner dead in a snowdrift—no, it wasn't sense!

A knock at the door and Hester entered with a letter. The last post had come in. Hilary took the letter and said, in reply to her enquiry, that he had, after all, none to send to the post himself.

It was perhaps as well that he had not looked at the envelope in his hand until the door had closed behind the parlourmaid. For when he did, he stared at it with an expression few people had ever seen on his face, and then very fervently consigned its sender to perdition. The handwriting on the envelope was again Mr. Claude Milburn's.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“**W**HAT a pity you’ve got to go to Oxford this afternoon, Hilary!” said Chloe regretfully at breakfast on Saturday morning. “Some rather dear old people who knew my mother when she was a little girl, Mr. and Mrs. Pynsent, are taking me to hear Kreisler at the Albert Hall to-morrow afternoon. They have a box, and they have sent me an extra voucher for Denzil, but he is engaged, and your sister says she doesn’t really enjoy the violin. If you hadn’t been going away perhaps I could have persuaded you to come with me instead?”

“I shouldn’t have needed much persuasion,” said poor Hilary. “But I’m afraid I can’t get out of . . . this visit.” He hesitated a moment. “It’s just possible, however, that I might manage to get back in time for the concert. It’s at three o’clock, I suppose?”

“Oh, good!” exclaimed the girl. “Yes, three o’clock. Do try to be back! Kreisler is so wonderful!”

“But, Uncle Hilary, have you thought about the Sunday trains from Oxford?” put in Quentin, an authority on G.W.R. time tables. “Oh, well, I believe there *is* a train at one o’clock which gets to Paddington at 2.40. But what about lunch—wouldn’t you miss it? If you are going to stay with that Mr. Frobisher at Merton, it would be a pity to miss a meal with him for the sake of a *concert*! Do you remember the luscious tea he gave us once at his college, Mother?—But perhaps you aren’t going to stay with Mr. Frobisher, Uncle?”

“Never mind whom your uncle is going to stay with!”

said Rosalind severely. "How often must I tell you not to be so dreadfully inquisitive!"

And yet she herself would very much have liked to learn something about Hilary. Not about his visit to Oxford, for, having still several friends there, he ran down from time to time to see them (though indeed this particular visit had been somewhat unexpectedly announced yesterday at breakfast time), but about Hilary himself. For the last twenty-four hours he had been so subdued. If he did not look exactly ill, he certainly looked very much harassed. Either it was his work or . . . Chloe.

For by now Rosalind Fortescue strongly suspected that, if not actually in love with his friend's future wife, Hilary was on the road to it. And knowing her brother and his (thank God) old-fashioned notions of honour and decent behaviour she was well aware that nothing would come of it—nothing, that was to say, but pain for him. It might even be that he had suddenly arranged this visit to an unspecified "man" at Oxford in order to see less of Chloe this week-end. And now Chloe had asked him to go to this concert with her . . . and he was instantly contemplating the curtailment of his visit! Natural, very natural, poor boy . . . but in that case why have arranged the visit at all? She threw him an affectionate glance. He looked as if he had not slept much last night. Of course she would respect his secret, and had she only guessed it earlier she would not have confided to him her misgivings about the engagement. That talk last Sunday must have been very painful for him. Everything was really most unsatisfactory, for Chloe, dear little Chloe, so gay and fresh and gentle and understanding, would have been just the right wife for him.

Here was Chloe herself saying, "That's arranged then,

Hilary! If your friends will let you, you'll try to get back in time. I'll give you the voucher for the box and you can come straight up—it's on the second tier—and I'll expect you up to the last moment."

Rosalind, Chloe and Quentin would indeed have been surprised if they could have seen Hilary, suitcase in hand, standing at half-past two that afternoon on the platform at Liverpool Street. Not quite the station to choose for a journey to Oxford, was his own sardonic reflection. But then he was not going to Oxford—never had been. His alleged visit there was only a blind, a lie, to cover a very different expedition. He was going to Ely to find out, if he could, whether Denzil really had been there on the first of February.

Yes, he had told them all at Ormiston Place a deliberate lie about his movements this week-end, and he was on his way to spy, behind his best friend's back, upon his past actions. But in spite of the cold misery which filled him, with which too the gloom of that always gloomy station seemed so consonant, Hilary had this much to sustain him—that his true intention in going to Cambridgeshire was to find evidence which should once for all dispose of Milburn's insinuations, more especially of the direct charge—for it was nothing less—contained in his second missive of last Thursday evening.

That letter, very short, had been sounding in his ears at intervals ever since. He could have repeated it by heart as he walked now along the train trying to find an empty carriage.

As a postscript to my letter of yesterday from London, I wish to present you with a fact which may assist your re-

searches. Since my arrival at Staneley Court I have learnt that in the late afternoon of Wednesday, February 1st, a gentleman in the thirties, tall, dark, and clean-shaven, apparently a stranger to the neighbourhood, came to this house enquiring for me, and seemed much dashed on hearing that I had left, with my host, for London. From all accounts he was driving a Bentley.

When first Hilary had read this "postscript" his instinct had been to cry, "He has made this up, the malicious devil!" But in the watches of the night he saw that nothing could set his own mind at rest but to establish once and for all that Denzil had spent the night of the first of February where he was supposed to have spent it—at Ely. And that was why Hilary was now on his way there, intending to take a room at the "Phoenix," the hotel from which Denzil had written to him, and to elicit, as unobtrusively as he could, whether Mr. Folyat's stay there had been uninterrupted or no.

He found a corner seat, and, as the train pulled out, resolutely opened a very bad thriller which he had bought at the bookstall. Anything to keep his mind for a while off that letter. The attempt was not a success, save that having read a page without taking in its meaning (if any) he had the occupation of reading it over again. At one point he struggled, rather more successfully, with the crossword in *The Times*. The journey seemed to last about six hours or so, yet in the end he was quite startled when, as the train slowed down, a little girl in the carriage cried joyfully, "Mummie here's E-ly!"

There proved to be no difficulty in securing a room at the "Phoenix" at this time of year, no difficulty either in verifying the fact of Denzil's having put up there five

weeks ago, for Hilary, signing his own name in the hotel register, had only to turn back to the date of January 30th to see his friend's familiar signature. It seemed sharply to reproach him with what he was doing . . .

He followed the boots who carried his suitcase to the lift. It would not do to start enquiries about Folyat's stay at the very instant of arrival; he would go up to his room first for a short while.

But he soon found that he could not remain there doing nothing except endure, as in the train, the sickening movement of a kind of mental see-saw, now soaring up (it couldn't have been Denzil in Crutchley's Lane; he was here in Ely, at this hotel), now plunging downwards (what about the tall, dark, clean-shaven enquirer at Staneley Court with a Bentley?—and Milburn's letter to Chloe, missing). After a little of this he resolved to go down and without more delay tackle the hall porter, a fat, genial-looking personage, who would in any case be the best man to approach, and who in five weeks would probably not have forgotten Denzil, a just but liberal tipper. Hilary could already imagine him saying, "Away for a night, sir? No, sir, Mr. Folyat was here the whole time. I should certainly remember if he had spent a night away from the hotel."

Hilary had got as far as the landing outside his bedroom when a possibility which he had overlooked presented itself to him with the suddenness and almost the force of a thunderclap, so that he stood stockstill outside his door, to the bewilderment of the lift boy, who had just come up with a passenger, and, seeing Hilary emerge, was waiting to convey him down. Provided that the snow had not been too thick, Denzil could have driven to the Cotswolds, called at Staneley Court in the late afternoon,

and got back to Ely before midnight! Even if it were certain that he had slept every night of those four between January 30th and February 3rd in a bed at the "Phoenix," that alone would prove nothing. Fool that he had been—it was not the *night* of February 1st, it was the *day* that mattered.

The lift-boy abandoned his vigil, shut the gate and descended. The clang woke Hilary from his brief trance of dismay. He walked slowly down the stairs. To establish Denzil's movements during the day was going to be much more difficult. He could but try, however; and surely, surely the hall porter would tell him that Mr. Folyat had obviously been, during all those four days, immersed in the winding up of his great-aunt's affairs like—what had been Denzil's own phrase?—'like a wasp in marmalade!'

"There doesn't happen to be a letter for 'Severn', I suppose, porter?" he began by way of opening, addressing that functionary across his counter in the hall.

The man looked in his set of pigeon-holes, quite naturally without result. "No, sir, nothing for that name."

"I see," pursued Hilary conversationally, "that you had a friend of mine, a Mr. Folyat, staying here about the time of the snowstorm at the beginning of February."

"Indeed, sir? Can't say as I remember him; we have so many visitors to Ely to see the cathedral—not so many of course in the winter months. But we had hardly any snow here, sir——"

"That's curious," remarked Hilary, disappointed to find that Denzil was not instantly remembered by the man, "because something connected with the bad weather happened to Mr. Folyat here. He told me about it, but I can't remember exactly what it was. Either he was snowed up in his car, or tried to get somewhere from here and

couldn't, or was called away suddenly and was unable to get back . . . whatever was it now . . . ?”

Light broke upon the stout individual the other side of the counter. “I remember now, sir! The gentleman with the Bentley car—would he be driving a Bentley?”

“Yes—a tall, dark man with a Bentley.” Hilary found himself involuntarily reproducing the Staneley Court description.

“Here on legal business connected with the late Miss Lucy Strangways, I believe he was, sir. Stayed some days. Yes, you're right; he went off in the car one afternoon rather unexpectedly—said he shouldn't be back by dinner time, he didn't suppose, nor he wasn't back that night at all. He came back next day by train, without the car too, it having had a break down—but not owing to snow, sir. Some mechanical trouble, I understood.”

Hilary's heart seemed to have sunk to the level of the floor of the lounge, but he got out in as natural a voice as he could produce, “Ah, he went away and had difficulty in getting back? I thought that was it. . . . But you say that it wasn't snow that stopped him?” (Was there a grain of comfort in that?)

“Couldn't have been, sir,” said the porter cheerfully. “'Cause there wasn't no snow worth mentioning between here and Norwich.”

“*Norwich!*” said Hilary, almost with a gasp. “Oh . . . it was . . . Norwich he went to.”

“Yessir. On account of Miss Strangways' legal business, I think, sir. Mr. Trewchild of that big firm of solicitors at Norwich rang him up the day before. Very unfortunate about Mr. Folyat's car, because he told me he'd stayed the night and most of next morning at Norwich in the hope of its being ready, which it wasn't, and he had to arrange-

to have it sent to London after him."

Norwich was a relief, even a great relief; it was in the opposite direction to the Cotswolds. It remained to find out which was the night Denzil had spent at Norwich.

"Then Mr. Folyat was without his car the rest of the time?" he pursued. "How unlucky for him! But perhaps the breakdown happened at the conclusion of his stay, which I know ended on the Friday. Would it be the Thursday he went to Norwich?"

The porter looked at him attentively for a moment, and suddenly Hilary thought with alarm, "If there is anything wrong, here I am directing attention to Denzil's movements in the most significant way. . . . Why did I ever start this enquiry?" But after scratching his head with a pencil the man said thoughtfully, "The gentleman came back from Norwich the day before he went off to London by train, so if, as you say, sir, that was a Friday, then it was a Thursday the day he came back from Norwich, and so it must have been the Wednesday he went to Norwich. Yes, it would be the Wednesday, because it was market day the day he came back from Norwich, and that's Thursday. I remember that well now, because on market day there's a good many farmers in here, and the waiter wanted to know at lunch-time if Mr. Folyat's table would be required, or whether he could put some of 'em at it."

"I see," said Hilary. Then Denzil *was* absent from Ely on that Wednesday—but at Norwich. "It isn't really a matter of importance," he added, summoning up a laugh, "but, as he wrote me a letter on the Wednesday which must have been posted fairly late in the evening, because I didn't get it in London by the first post next morning, I should have thought that he couldn't have been away

from here on Wednesday evening . . . It's . . . it's not unconnected with a bet, this business," he concluded rather desperately, suddenly bethinking him of that time-honoured device for extracting information, and (perhaps) lulling suspicion.

"Ah, a *bet!*" said the porter, his face clearing. "Well, sir, I can explain to you about your letter. Just at that time we had a very lazy lad what never could be depended on to clear the letter-box here properly—although I was always after him. He was sacked next week. We had complaints from the visitors. It don't prove that that letter was written on Wednesday night, I'm sorry to say, sir; it might have been written early in the morning for all one can tell, with that young scoundrel sometimes clearing the box and sometimes not. . . . A stamp, madam? Yes, certainly."

In the grove of the great Norman nave of Ely Cathedral Hilary tried to rearrange his jumbled thoughts. He had escaped from one see-saw only to find himself tied to another one. The blow of finding that Denzil had most certainly been away on the first of February, and for the night too, was it counterbalanced by being told that he had been even farther away from Staneley than Ely was? He could not be sure. Was it odd that Denzil had never mentioned his flying visit to Norwich, the contretemps, whatever it was with his car, and his being deprived of it, so that he had had to return to London by train? Was that singular or wasn't it? Denzil had never said a word about it; in fact he had certainly allowed Hilary to think that he had been at Ely all the time; hadn't he jokingly said something about Hilary's claim to a senior wrangler-ship because he had added up the nights of his stay there

correctly? It did seem rather unnatural . . . yet Hilary knew now—and it still hurt a bit—that there were much more important things in his life which his friend kept from him. But about this he had done more—he had tacitly lied.


Still, Denzil hadn't been anywhere near the Cotswolds that night; and Milburn's abominable accusations were groundless! That was an immense relief. And with a lighter heart Hilary began to wander round the cathedral.

But somehow he did not take in its beauties. He was not satisfied. It was in the famous octagon that he began to think wretchedly, "I suppose that this sleuthing does teach one something about the relative value of evidence. I wish it didn't! It is no good shutting my eyes to the fact that I have only this to go upon, that the porter says Denzil told him that he had spent the night at Norwich and left his car there. That isn't evidence for an alibi which would really hold water for a moment. Yet it *is* evidence of a sort, I suppose, for why on earth should Denzil name Norwich if he had not been there; and it is even quite a likely place for him to be called away to, over this great-aunt's legal affairs, even though it isn't the right county town. It's a much bigger place than Cambridge, and it seems that he was already in communication with a firm of solicitors there . . . I wonder where he stayed . . . I might ask the porter—only that I am afraid to reopen the subject—and he probably wouldn't know if I did. I certainly can't go through all the hotels of Norwich looking for Denzil's name in their registers, for even if I didn't find it, that would prove nothing, since he might well have been staying at a private house—possibly with this Mr. Trewchild who was mentioned. The same objection applies to combing out the garages there, try-

ing to find out at which a gentleman left a Bentley for repairs on the first or second of February. I *might* ask the porter if he heard Mr. Folyat mention a garage."

But it was precisely the remembrance of the look on the porter's face at one point in their conversation which finally decided Hilary to drop the whole idea of investigations in Norwich. There, still more than in Ely, going round from hotel to hotel, garage to garage, would he be acting exactly like a detective on the trail of a guilty or suspected person—and that person his own best friend, who was, please God, neither guilty nor suspected. But if in the event—impossible of course, really—Denzil's alibi were ever questioned, how intolerable to feel that he himself had perhaps helped to throw doubts upon it. No, he would not go to Norwich. He would take the evidence about Denzil's stay there for what it was worth which was, after all, a good deal.

He came out of the great building and stood looking up at the soaring lines and turrets of the western tower. The cathedral was not his to dispose of, yet for one wild moment he felt that he would have given it, with all its glory, if only he could have established that Denzil had never left Ely at all on that fatal Wednesday.



CHAPTER TWELVE

HILARY might have cancelled his room at the "Phoenix" and returned to London that same night, but to give a convincing reason at Ormiston Place for this very early termination of his supposed Oxford visit would be difficult. Yet at least he would be able to get back on Sunday in time to join Chloe in the Albert Hall to hear Kreisler.

In plenty of time, indeed—as he discovered when he consulted the railway guide! Owing to the paucity of Sunday trains from Ely, the only one which would get him up to London in time to reach the Albert Hall at three o'clock left at 8.41 a.m. and landed him at Liverpool Street at 10.50. But as he was supposed (if he returned at all on Sunday) to be catching the one o'clock from Oxford, which did not get in till 2.40, he must leave it to be assumed that he *had* come by that train. Consequently, on arrival in London after this matutinal Sabbath start, he had no choice but to go to his club, lie *perdu* and lunch there, and to turn up with his suitcase at the Albert Hall a few minutes before three.

He was just about to deposit the suitcase in the cloak-room there when he noticed that some zealous person at the "Phoenix" had decorated it with the hotel label, and he lost some time in extracting a knife and scratching most of this off, somewhat to the wonder of the attendant. Then he hastened up the many wide stone stairs to the second tier, hurried round the curving corridor, found the right box—its door was still ajar, showing that Chloe, as she

had promised, still expected him—and stole in.

He had run it rather fine, for the roar of applause which burst out as he pushed open the door of the box showed him that the great violinist had appeared on the platform. Hilary tiptoed forward to take the chair left for him, finding the other occupied by an elderly gentleman, while Chloe with an elderly lady and a child with plaits sat upon the three chairs in the forefront of the box. Chloe turned round and gave him a smile of welcome, but not even whispered introductions could now be performed, for even as Hilary took his seat the first notes of Mozart's Concerto in D Major came singing into the ears of the vast audience.

Hilary sat beside the elderly gentleman, presumably Mr. Pynsent, in a kind of dream, while presently the music of the lovely Andante flowed over him, and if Chloe, in front of him, moved her head, he had glimpses of her profile, and the golden glint of her hair under her little tilted hat. It was just a week since his discovery in the Science Museum, and his resolve to stamp out the smouldering fire of which he had become aware . . . and this was how he was doing it!

Half-way through the programme he was made to take the place of the child with the plaits, and so for the rest of the time he sat beside Chloe, and knew that he ought not to have ventured to be with her in an atmosphere so charged with heightened feeling and perception. The violin, in *those* hands, was too dangerous. . . . Towards the end she pointed to an item on the programme and said, "You see, he's going to play that darling tune of Debussy's—I've heard him play it before—'La fille aux cheveux de lin.'"

The "darling tune" proved to be the culminating ordeal.

Gay, delicate and haunting, it seemed to Hilary as it winged its way across the space between him and the magician below to be played for him alone, in honour of her by whose side he sat, who was herself *la fille aux cheveux de lin* . . . and Denzil's betrothed.

Kreisler, recalled, as usual, again and again, had given four encores; the short two hours of ecstasy and pain were over. "You'll come back to tea with us, won't you, Mr. Severn, and then you can escort Miss Page home?"

"I ought to refuse," thought Hilary; "make an excuse about taking my bag back to Ormiston Place." He began, laudably enough, to say something to this effect; but Mrs. Pynsent would have none of it. "Your bag can go in the car, Mr. Severn, if you will get it out from the cloakroom."

"No, my dear," objected her husband, "that will delay us; it's always such a business getting away from the Albert Hall when it is as crowded as it is to-day. You shall give the ticket for it to the chauffeur, my dear sir, and he will come back here after he has driven us home, rescue your bag and take it straight to your house."

When, in the press outside, Hilary at last saw the aristocratic chauffeur, and the stately Rolls-Royce which was to bear his rather shabby suitcase to Ormiston Place, he was considerably tickled, occupied though he was at the moment in wondering where the Pynsents lived—at some distance, he hoped—and whether after tea Chloe would be inclined (and allowed) to walk home.

Tea at the Pynsents' turned out to be a pleasant as well as a sumptuous meal, and Chloe did beg to be allowed to walk the short distance from Ennismore Gardens instead of being sent in the car. "Well, as you have a suitable escort, my dear," conceded old Mr. Pynsent, who

seemed to be almost pre-Victorian in his ideas, "I will not raise any objection."

"Aren't they delightful old dears!" said Chloe laughing, as she and Hilary started back. "I shouldn't wonder if they don't think that a 'young girl' (I'm sure that's what they would call her) ought not to ride on the top of a bus! It makes me feel that I must regard this walk home as a sort of adventure—though at least I've got a 'protector.' Will you protect me at the crossings, Hilary—that's the only danger I can think of?"

"I'll carry you over, if you like," said Hilary. It wasn't she who was in danger; it was himself. But the danger was sweet.

"You'd shock the policeman . . . I hope you didn't cut short your visit to Oxford just for the concert?"

"No, I didn't," replied the escort with truth; and went on very quickly to the subject of Kreisler's playing. Enthusiastic views were exchanged for a little way, but by the time they got to Queen's Gate something which Chloe let fall about her aunt led Hilary to ask with a feeling of dismay whether she were going to leave them.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, on Wednesday. My aunt is to come out of the nursing home that day. It was only settled yesterday afternoon. I am so thankful that she has got better without an operation!"

"Yes, indeed," agreed Hilary, though, had he been her doctor, the poor lady would have had a much longer stay in the home. But of course Chloe must leave Ormiston Place some time . . . It was Chloe who broke the little silence which ensued.

"I seem hardly to have seen you alone this last week, Hilary, so I've not had an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness to me last Monday evening. I mean, in not

letting me go in when Denzil and Claude were at loggerheads with each other. It would have been so uncomfortable for all of us, as you said, if I had walked in just then. But you were right, it can't have amounted to much, because Denzil didn't seem . . . really put out. We had a very nice evening in the end."

"I'm so glad," murmured Hilary, and thought, "My hat, he must have done some pretty intensive pulling of himself together, then!"

"In fact," went on Chloe, as they crossed Gloucester Road, "he's been much more like himself this week. I'm sure he must have been unwell before . . . and I feel sure now that I was exaggerating things when I had that talk with you about him. But I was most grateful to you for listening to me, and what you said about Denzil helped me a lot."

("You darling!") said Hilary's heart. "It's very nice of you to feel that," replied his tongue, "but I'm afraid my assistance didn't amount to much, because, if you remember, our talk was cut short by the arrival of your cousin."

Chloe gave a little laugh, quite light-hearted. "That was rather unexpected, wasn't it? And then Denzil too! I suppose it's no good asking you what they said to each other after I had left the room?—No, I can imagine it! Claude will not accept facts. . . . By the way, you haven't heard yet what has happened to him, poor thing!"

"No, what?" asked Hilary, pricking up his ears at the adjective, which held hopeful implications.

"He's had a fall out hunting, and got bad concussion, and he's in bed down at his friend's house in Gloucestershire, and not allowed to see anyone."

Then there *was* some justice in the universe after all! Hilary could not bring himself to even a conventional ex-

pression of sympathy; all he could manage was: "It must have been a bad fall—lucky for him he hasn't broken anything!" But to himself he added fiercely, "I wish he had broken his neck!"

It was only when he was up in his own room that it occurred to him that Milburn's being knocked out like this was opportune as well as gratifying. He had returned this morning oppressed by his inability to assure that gentleman after all of Folyat's uninterrupted stay at Ely from January 30th to February 3rd. But now Milburn and his insinuations could safely be ignored for a while; and as for his own disloyal misgivings, he must try to ignore them too.

Yet when, a little later, he opened the drawing-room door and, to his surprise, heard Denzil's voice within, the instant sinking of the heart which he experienced showed him that it was not those misgivings alone which chained him there for an instant. Even stronger than they was a sense of shame at what he had been driven into doing behind Denzil's back. •

However, he went in. Rosalind as well as Chloe was there, and Denzil, standing talking to them, turned and greeted him cheerfully.

"Hallo, Hilary! I've just managed to snatch half an hour between the entertaining of these Frenchmen. Such a day of talking and eating! The Gauls certainly engage in both with all their hearts! I hear you have been down to Oxford. Had a pleasant time?"

"Yes, thanks." (So much was easy.) "What Frenchmen are you talking of? I haven't heard anything about them."

"Oh, sorry! I thought Chloe had perhaps mentioned this visit of the French art critics in connection with the exhibition at Burlington House. I was roped in to help

give them lunch, which was why I couldn't go to hear Kreisler; and now I've been let in for this dinner to them to-night."

"Denzil," said Chloe, almost in a tone of awe, "are you really having to talk French all day to these men—or can they talk English?"

Rosalind interposed. "But, Chloe, that's no hardship to him! Don't you know that he speaks French almost like a native?"

"No, I didn't. Have you been a lot in France, Denzil?"

"Yes, a fair amount," answered Denzil with perfect composure. It was Hilary who felt that he did not know where to look. However in a moment it was his turn again, for Rosalind began to speak of some great friends of hers in Oxford, and asked whether her brother had found time to look them up.

"No, I'm afraid I didn't, Rose," he confessed rather deprecatingly. "You see it was a very short visit. I'll make a point of it next time I'm there."

"Whom were you staying with?" asked Denzil carelessly. "Frobisher?"

"No. No one you know," returned Hilary, attempting the same ease. "By the way, since you're here, you haven't forgotten that we're all going to the Old Vic to-morrow night?"

"Of course he hasn't forgotten your party," Chloe assured him. "We were talking about it just before you came in."

"Uncle Hilary," asked Quentin, who had just put in an appearance, "did you notice what class of engine was on the one o'clock train from Oxford to-day?"

"No, I *never* notice engines!" retorted the traveller, who was beginning to feel that if any more questions about

Oxford were put to him he should stop them very effectually by revealing where he really had been.

Fortunately there were no more enquiries about his doings, and soon afterwards, to his relief, Denzil took his leave. He certainly did seem much more like his old self, and Chloe, when she returned from seeing him off, was looking more than contented. It *must* be all right; it was absurd to suppose that he had anything on his conscience! It was rather he, Hilary, who had something on his . . . and what it was Denzil must never learn.

All next day at the War Office Hilary was fairly successful in keeping his mind off the spectre which had begun to haunt him. In the evening they all went as his guests to the Old Vic, Folyat included, and even, since it was Shakespeare, Quentin, who in term time was not usually allowed to sit up so late. The play was *The Tempest*, and they all enjoyed it, though perhaps the elders did not appreciate to quite the same rapturous extent as Quentin the humours of Trinculo, Stefano and the "brave monster."

The staging of the divertissement provided by Prospero for his guests in the third act provoked some discussion in the interval, and Chloe, sitting between Denzil and Hilary, requested to be informed what exactly was an "apron" stage. Denzil explained it to her, and the distinction between it and the Elizabethan open, or platform stage.

"Isn't there," asked Rosalind, on Folyat's other side, "a theatre somewhere in the provinces with a kind of Elizabethan stage?"

"Yes," he answered promptly, "the Maddermarket Theatre at Norwich."

Beyond Chloe, Hilary, who heard this reply perfectly

well, had a sensation as though his hair were rising at the mention of that city. A sort of compulsion came over him to seize this opportunity, but it was as if some daemon spoke with his mouth when he asked, in the most casual tone he could command, and looking straight at the drop scene:

"Have you seen it yourself, Denzil—have you ever been to Norwich?"

"No, I haven't," came the reply. "Quentin, pass along those chocolates, unless you've eaten them all!"

Quentin, on the farther side of his uncle, crammed the lid on the box and gave it to Hilary for transit; and Hilary handed it to Chloe, gazing at the full-blown roses which adorned it as if he were counting each petal. Denzil had never been to Norwich; he had just said so! The hot theatre felt for a moment like a refrigerator. . . . Then he heard Chloe, as she picked out a chocolate, saying lightly, "I don't believe I've ever met *anyone* who'd been to Norwich; it seems to be a place one doesn't go to!"

"Somebody told me once—I can't remember who," remarked Mrs. Fortescue, "that Norwich Cathedral was beautiful, with a Norman apse. So people must go there."

"The man in the moon went there," Quentin, bending forward, informed the company. "When he came down too soon . . . I've forgotten the rest—something about porridge. But, Mr. Folyat," he continued, wriggling almost across Hilary's knees in order to direct his question, "did you mean that you had never been to Norwich, or never been to the theatre with the funny name? Because you said No, but Uncle Hilary asked you two things at once, you know!"

Denzil looked round at him. Did he seem a shade startled? Impossible to be sure. "Oh, acute youth!" he

said with a little smile, "you are perfectly correct, and I am obliged to you for pointing out that Uncle Hilary might have entrapped me into a false statement. I meant to say that I had not seen the Maddermarket Theatre—though I have been to Norwich."

"Oh, *you* have been there——" began Chloe. But just then the curtain went up on Prospero's cave; normal circulation and a deep sense of relief settled on Hilary, and he resolved in future to be less hard on Quentin for his inquisitive tendencies. Of course he *had* asked Denzil two questions at once!

But that night in bed it suddenly occurred to him what an unpleasantly accurate expression Denzil had used about "entrapping." Yet he couldn't have known of the investigations at Ely! Again, however, Hilary felt a moment's chill, this time on his own account. Yes, it was he who had something on his conscience now!

On the morning after the theatre party Denzil, by arrangement, called at Ormiston Place directly after breakfast in order to drive Chloe to her dentist, with whom she had an appointment at a quarter to ten. And, since they were so early astir, he suggested that Hilary, who had not yet left the house, might well squeeze into the Bentley and be taken on to Whitehall after Chloe had been dropped in Queen Anne Street. So Hilary tucked himself into the seat beside her, and Denzil drove away.

Arrived in Queen Anne Street Hilary jumped out to let Chloe alight, and Denzil got out also, and escorted her towards the dentist's door. Before they reached it Chloe stopped, and pointed to a pillar-box a little way along the pavement. Denzil thereupon came back to the car, in which Hilary had meanwhile re-established himself.

"There's a letter of Chloe's for post in that left-hand pocket, if you'll give it to me," said Folyat.

Fishing about, for the letter had slipped into the depths, Hilary retrieved it and handed it out just as the dentist's door opened to admit Chloe; and while Denzil went off to the pillar-box Hilary picked up from the floor of the car a bit of paper which had come out of the pocket with the letter, and had unfolded itself in so doing. It was a single rather crumpled sheet like a bill, with the printed heading, "Poynter's Garage, Chipping Norton," under which was scribbled in a large, legible hand the words:

Mr. Folyat's Bentley sports coupé to be driven up to London—Palace Garage, Earl Street, S.W.1—as soon as weather permits.

That was all. No, there was something more—a date. And it was February 2nd.

The paper seemed glued to Hilary's hand. Chipping Norton . . . *in the Cotswolds!* What was Denzil's car doing, left at a garage there, only ten miles from Staneley, on February 2nd, to be taken home when the weather permitted? That meant, when the snow had stopped. But Denzil had left the car at Norwich that day, at *Norwich*, not Chipping Norton! For a moment Hilary felt deadly sick. . . .

"Hallo, what's that you've got hold of?" asked Denzil's voice beside him. He was just inserting himself into the driver's seat. Hilary, staring stupefied at what he held in his hand, had not heard him open the door. Now, losing his head, he tried to stuff the paper back into the pocket on his side, only partially succeeding.

"It's nothing," he said hurriedly. "Only some garage

chit or other. It fell out when I fetched up the letter just now."

"You seemed to find it very enthralling, anyhow," commented Denzil lightly. "I didn't know that there was anything from my garage in there. Let's have a look at it." And as Hilary did not move he leant across him and pulled out the paper for himself.

There was silence for a moment, while Denzil in his turn gazed at it, and Hilary stared blindly at the bonnet of the car. Fool that he had been! If only he had thrust the paper into his own pocket Denzil would never have asked to see it!

Denzil's voice, not very much changed in tone, came to him.

"No, I certainly did not know that this was in the car. But why, may I ask, did it interest you so deeply?"

Hilary coloured hotly. "Oh, only that I . . . I didn't know you had been at Chipping Norton lately."

"Well, now you know that I have!" retorted Denzil with extreme dryness, and let in the clutch. Without another word he swung the car out of Queen Anne Street, crossed Cavendish Square, negotiated Oxford Circus and proceeded down Regent Street still in the same ominous silence, which Hilary, sitting frozen beside him, could find no means to break. Desperately he cast about for some possible topic of conversation, but there seemed to be none—not Chloe, not the car, not the play last night, not . . . anything!

And then, to his real thankfulness, just at the beginning of the Quadrant a taxi-driver in front of them, turning, after the manner of taxi-drivers, without warning, obliged Denzil to brake hard, whereupon a car behind crashed into his rear bumper. Thrice blessed deliverance! In the

ensuing discussion and recriminations Hilary seized the opportunity to excuse himself and continue his journey to the War Office by bus.

He was late home that evening. There had been a good deal of work for him at the office, and he, no doubt, had been slower than usual getting through it. With that turmoil in his mind, it was terribly hard to concentrate on routine affairs which seemed at the moment of such deadly unimportance. Still, the work had to be done; he polished it off finally, and got home, weary and infinitely dispirited, after seven o'clock. One conclusion alone he had arrived at, and that was, that he would have to have it out with Denzil: tell him about Milburn's letters—yes, and confess to his own spying. How he would take these revelations Hilary could not imagine, but it was impossible to go on like this, especially after the episode in the car this morning.

They would, however, be obliged to get through the evening first, for Denzil was coming to dinner on this, Chloe's last night at Ormiston Place, and there would be neither time nor opportunity for so momentous an interview. If only Denzil would make some excuse and not come!

But Denzil came. When he entered the drawing-room his manner was exactly as usual—but his appearance was not. Hilary was quite shocked at his looks, and wondered what Chloe would think of them. But her betrothed showed at dinner no sign of fatigue, unless almost feverish high spirits were a mark of it. Chloe at first was very cheerful also, displaying to the full her engaging qualities of unaffected gaiety, friendliness and zest. Only to look at her was a refreshment of the spirit. But once or twice

Hilary caught her gazing at Folyat, when he was talking to Rosalind for instance, with undisguised anxiety. It would indeed have been surprising if she had not been perturbed, when he wore an air little short of ghastly. Indeed, before the end of the meal his aspect had so worked upon Hilary that he was dreading acutely the moment when he should be left alone with him. To his relief Rosalind, on rising from table, admonished the two men not to linger too long in the dining-room, whereupon Denzil instantly suggested that they should accompany the ladies at once to the drawing-room.

Here they played bridge; but the game went awry from the start. Denzil, a first-class player, partnering Mrs. Fortescue, not only had a persistent run of ill luck, but did not make the best of what Fate allotted him; in fact Hilary had never seen him play so badly. And he himself made blunder after blunder—but, again, how could he concentrate on this futile pastime when there was this ache in his heart—this more than ache, this secret terror of what lay behind that scrap of paper in the pocket of the Bentley? The nightmare idea evoked by Milburn was really taking shape now, but he saw it not so much as something which Denzil might have done, but as a danger which threatened him . . . like a huge menacing djinn under Milburn's control. And Milburn was an implacable enemy. What, in God's name, could be done to turn aside the menace?

Since he felt thus, Hilary's part in the way the evening terminated was as ironical as it was unforeseen.

They had played one rubber, and were nearly through the second, when Rosalind was called away to the telephone in the dining-room. Hilary, who was now her partner, got up and went over to the table with the drinks.

"This seems an opportune moment for refreshments. Chloe, you like lemonade, I know." And he was filling the glasses when he heard Chloe, at the card-table, say in a lowered tone, "Denzil, aren't you feeling well to-night?"

"What, because I'm playing so rottenly?" Folyat's counter-question was abrupt, and sounded none too amiable.

"Were you? I'm not a good enough player myself to recognise that. I meant because you look . . . really ill. I don't believe you ought to have come. *Are* you all right?"

Hilary by this time was carefully carrying two full glasses back to the card-table. He was thunderstruck by the almost savage look of annoyance on Folyat's face, as he answered, with the most ungracious curtness, "Of course I'm all right. Don't fuss so, Chloe!"

The girl winced visibly. And to his own entire amazement Hilary, just now so consumed with anxiety on his friend's behalf, was conscious of a hot gust of anger against him.

"I say, Denzil, that's not very polite!" he exclaimed.

Denzil looked up at him. "Who asked you to interfere? I was speaking to Chloe."

"I know you were—but I wondered if you realised it!" retorted Hilary, angrier than ever.

Denzil got up. As for Chloe, she had turned quite white.

"You seem well on the way to making a hobby of interference in my private affairs," said Folyat with blazing eyes. "This morning's prying, and now——"

"Denzil!" said Chloe imploringly across the table. "Oh, Hilary, please don't say any more!"

And indeed at that home thrust Hilary could not. He

stood there a second encumbered with the two full glasses; then he went and put them back on the tray, spilling the lemonade a little as he did so. Behind him he heard Chloe saying, "Denzil, I'm not fussing—but if you aren't ill what *is* the matter?" and his reply:

"If only I could persuade you that I want to be left alone!"

Hilary swung quickly round, but before he could say anything Chloe had jumped to her feet.

"Well, you shall be!" she retorted with a burst of spirit, stood a moment facing him, then, pulling out her pocket-handkerchief, fairly ran from the room.

Denzil sat down again, took up his half-played hand, and examined it with interest. Hilary marched over to him.

"Do you know what you've done?" he demanded, quite carried out of himself with anger. Then he saw the tense misery on Denzil's face and it pulled him up. But Denzil's mouth said mockingly: "Do go on with your lecture; I'm listening!"

Fortunately at that moment the door opened and Rosalind came back.

"So sorry to keep you waiting!—But what has happened? Where is Chloe?"

It was Denzil who answered her, speaking in a fairly controlled voice.

"She has gone to her room, Mrs. Fortescue. The tooth she had stopped this morning suddenly began to ache rather badly. She asked me to make her apologies to you."

That was rather wonderful of Denzil; and he must be backed up quickly. "Yes, isn't it unfortunate?" Hilary found himself saying. But when Rosalind instantly exclaimed, "Oh, poor girl, I must go to her at once!" he

was not so sure that Denzil's impromptu lie had been so well inspired after all. He himself murmured something about Chloe particularly wanting Rosalind not to bother about her; but it naturally had no effect, and in another moment he and Folyat were alone together again.

But not for long. Denzil immediately said, "I'm going. Please say good night to your sister for me. Don't trouble to see me out!"

Hilary did not. When the sound of the front door closing came to his ears he was standing by the table, mechanically gathering together the cards, and he was still doing the same thing when some minutes later Rosalind returned, her face grave.

"Chloe's door is locked. Hilary, what is the matter—something worse than toothache!"

Hilary answered nothing, but slid a pack with great care into its box.

"They had a disagreement of some kind, I suppose?" asked his sister.

"Not exactly," responded Hilary shortly. "Chloe did nothing. It was Denzil's fault entirely. And I lost my temper with him—badly. I'd rather not talk about it."

Rosalind took a long look at him as he went towards the door, and then without comment gathered up the bridge markers.

But with his hand on the door-knob Hilary startled her by saying vehemently, almost accusingly:

"I believe I know what you're thinking! But you're quite wrong. It's not that at all, really!" The door shut.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INTO the room at the War Office which Hilary shared with his Assistant Principal, Pemberton, entered the messenger bearing a sheaf of papers, which he laid at Hilary's elbow and departed. Hilary turned them over. He had got to give his attention to these somehow. Pemberton, over at his own table, seemed to be sunk in industry. Lucky devil!

The telephone rang. Hilary stretched out his hand.

"Can I speak to Mr. Severn?"

"Severn speaking."

It was, as he had half expected, Denzil's voice. "I want to ask you a favour." (It was not often that Denzil worded a request like that.) "Will you come straight to my rooms from Whitehall this evening, if you have no other engagement? We should be more undisturbed here than at Ormiston Place."

"Yes, I'll come direct to you," answered Hilary. "I'll be with you by half-past six."

"Thank you."

That was all, but it was a relief. The sooner the better!

Little sleep had come Hilary Severn's way last night. The sharp disintegration of his personal world which had been taking place of late had reached a much acuter stage yesterday with that clash between him and Denzil over—of all things!—Denzil's behaviour to the girl he was engaged to. It seemed incredible. And behind it, looming increasingly sinister, was something worse.

Denzil's haggard face and his bitter words—and Chloe's

heart-struck look just before she had run from the room, as they had haunted him in his bed, now they kept coming between him and his work. He had wondered unhappily in the night in what light Chloe would regard his championship of her against her betrothed. She had not appeared at breakfast, and he had had to leave for the War Office without any chance of a personal farewell, but Rosalind had brought a message from her to the effect that he must remember she was not leaving London, only going to her aunt in Hans Place, so that she would not say good-bye; and this, which certainly did not suggest resentment, was a little reassuring.

The question was, whether it was going to be good-bye to Denzil because of last night? Not unless Denzil willed it so. There had been nothing in the tone of his voice over the telephone just now to show his intentions, but at any rate this evening's interview must clear up the situation one way or the other.

He was thankful when the time came for him to leave the War Office. Before doing so he telephoned to Rosalind not to keep dinner for him, and then went out into Whitehall.

Denzil's bell was not out of order now, and Dawson admitted him instantly. For a moment Hilary thought the firelit room was empty, until he saw Denzil was busy at the writing-table in the window. He sprang up as Hilary was announced, thrust the paper in front of him into a drawer and came forward.

"It's good of you to have come at such short notice, Hilary," he said, in quite a matter-of-fact tone, "but the sooner we get this over the better, don't you think?"

"I do certainly," answered Hilary in much the same

fashion. "In fact I felt yesterday morning that we should have to . . . have a talk. About last night . . . I'm sorry."

So he was, and more than sorry, but he could not honestly feel that it was for him to apologise for what had occurred then.

"You can't regret it as much as I do," said Folyat, looking him straight in the face as he spoke. And then he turned his head aside. "I have made Chloe the best amends in my power. As for you, Hilary," and now he was looking at him again, "what I said to you about your preoccupation with my affairs would have been quite unpardonable . . . if I had not had some justification for it. I had some, hadn't I?"

"Yes," admitted Hilary sadly, "You *had* justification for what you said—that's the worst of it . . . I have a good deal to explain, I quite admit."

"So have I. Come and sit down then," said Folyat, and led the way to the two big armchairs by the fire. His tone was still dry and contained; worn and tense though he looked, he was plainly quite master of himself this evening. Hilary followed him.

A jade bowl of anemones blood-red, peach colour and purple, stood on the mantelpiece under the picture of the girl martyr; the heat of the fire had opened them to the heart, so that their glowing beauty caught Hilary's eye in spite of himself. Next instant, however, his gaze was arrested by something very different; for the bowl stood partly upon a piece of paper which he recognised only too quickly. It was the fatal memorandum from the Chipping Norton garage.

Denzil's look followed his own. "Yes," he said evenly, "we shall be discussing that presently, shan't we? Have a cigarette."

Mechanically Hilary took one. Denzil held a match for him, but he did not light up himself.

"Sit down, won't you, because *I* should like to—and in spite of last night I still have some relics of decent manners left."

Without a word Hilary obeyed; but the chair, so engulfing and luxurious, seemed unsuitable for what he was going to hear and say. Moreover it was all very well to have resolved since yesterday morning to clear up this problem of Denzil's whereabouts on *that* evening, but when the moment of disclosure approached he would have given everything he possessed not to have brought it upon himself.

"About this sleuthing of yours, Hilary," began Folyat from the other chair, in a conversational tone. "I must confess that in the beginning I didn't think very much of your efforts as a detective, though admiring you for lavishing your leisure and your money on those week-ends of research. But your last attempt seems to have been more successful, and so"—here he pulled himself a little forward, "if you don't mind, I should like to know exactly to what point it has brought you?"

The moment had arrived. Hilary, his head between his hands, tried to frame some answer that was not, in effect, "To the point of wondering whether Jenner's death is not at *your* door." But not a word would emerge.

"Come on, my dear Hilary—a detective surely has no need to be ashamed of correct reasoning. No doubt you deduced from the memorandum up there that on February 1st I was not where you originally thought I was.—But then you knew that *before* you found it, didn't you?"

Hilary raised his head, bewildered. "*Before* I found

it? . . ." Then, conscious only of a frantic wish to avert his eyes from what seemed to be bearing down upon him, he exclaimed, giving the lie to all his resolves, "I don't care *where* you were on February 1st. I don't want to know!"

Yet even as he spoke a ray of hope pricked him. Denzil was so collected and so much his own rather satirical self that he *must* be going to give him some satisfactory explanation of it all. "I don't want to know," he repeated, "unless . . ."

Denzil, however, only said, "But you *did* want to know—else why did you go to Ely on Saturday to find out?"

Hilary heard himself give a gasp. "How on earth . . ."

"I'll tell you," said Denzil calmly. And calmly he got up, helped himself to a cigarette, lit it, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece looking down on Hilary. "Your experiments in detection must have set my brain working along similar lines—though I admit that its first operation was unconscious. On Sunday evening, when I arrived at Ormiston Place, I saw your suitcase standing on a chair in the hall, and I could not help noticing, on the end facing me, the middle portion of a brand-new hotel label, the rest of which had been torn off. There were just four letters left, a final 'X' and an initial 'HOT.' There was no name of any town. I never gave the bit of label another thought—in fact I doubt if I knew that I had noticed it, until that episode yesterday morning, when you were so overwhelmed by finding that memo from the Chipping Norton garage (which I never knew was there) in the pocket of the Bentley. It would have been quite natural for you to show some surprise at its contents, and to have made some comment on them, because I *had* left you under the impression that I had spent

all the time from that Monday to Friday at Ely. But the way you behaved when I found you with the paper in your hand was enough, my dear Hilary, to rouse the suspicions of a mental defective, and it set me thinking. And, as I thought, I remembered your rather pointed question at the Old Vic about Norwich. Now Ely was the only place where you could have heard that I had been detained for the night at Norwich. I hardly thought it possible that you could have been tracking me at Ely, till I remembered the fragment of label on your bag. To one who had stayed there so recently 'X HOT' inevitably suggested the "Phoenix Hotel." The rest was simple. I put through a trunk call yesterday afternoon to the "Phoenix" at Ely and found you had spent Saturday night there, though ostensibly you had gone on a visit to Oxford, about which, I remembered, you had been distinctly reticent on Sunday evening. Perhaps you can understand that I was not in a very sweet temper when I came to dinner at Ormiston Place last night. I felt that you might have come straight to me with your suspicions, instead of acting like a private enquiry agent behind my back. Why didn't you?"

Wince as he might, Hilary's heart leapt up again. It was going to be all right. Denzil *had* an explanation: he would never have asked him that question otherwise! So his concern to defend himself came second to an immense relief.

"Denzil, I don't know how to ask you to forgive me—I know it seems unpardonable—but on my honour I didn't go to Ely because I believed you . . . you had anything to do with what happened at Charton-under-Wold, but because someone else had suggested that you had, and I wanted to prove him a liar. I thought that if I could establish absolutely that you were at Ely all the time,

the ground would instantly be cut from under his feet. But if you were at *Norwich* it will do equally well," continued Hilary, in a tone that was more imploring than he realised. "It has just occurred to me that the car being at Chipping Norton doesn't prove that you were there—it might have been stolen."

Folyat's expression had grown sterner. Again he disappointed Hilary, yet it was quite natural that he should ask sharply, "Who is your someone who suspects me?"

"It's that brute, Milburn."

"Milburn? *Milburn* suspects me? Why? How do you know?"

"Because he wrote to me—twice in twenty-four hours! But, Denzil, as you were in *Norwich* . . ."

"What did he say?" asked Denzil with a suggestion of breathlessness in his voice. "Have you got the letters?"

"No, I destroyed them. But I know them almost by heart. He began by saying—no, first I must tell you that that evening he was at Ormiston Place, before you arrived, it came out in the course of conversation that Chloe had never received a letter which he had posted in the box at Crutchley's Corner on the afternoon of February 1st, the day of . . ."

Denzil interrupted. "Oh, there's no need to tell me what day that was! He didn't express any suspicion before Chloe, did he? (No, he can't have done!)"

"He didn't seem to have any himself then. And Chloe thought nothing of the loss, any more than I did. We agreed that in the circumstances the non-delivery of a letter was only natural. Unfortunately there was some little joking reference to 'a mystery,' and so it came out too that Mrs. Jenner had suspected foul play, an idea which I had done my best to dispel. Next day Milburn

wrote to this effect——” And Hilary gave the gist of that first epistle.

Denzil listened with a very dark face. After a moment's complete silence he asked, “And the second letter?”

“It came the same evening; that was the one which sent me to Ely. I couldn't do anything else but go, Denzil. He began—curse him—by saying that he wished to assist my researches, and went on something like this:

“‘Since my arrival at Staneley Court I have heard that in the late afternoon of the first of February a gentleman of about thirty, tall, dark and clean-shaven, who seemed a stranger to the neighbourhood, came here enquiring for me, and seemed much dashed to find that I had left. From all accounts he was driving a Bentley.’”

Denzil's hands gradually clenched themselves. Then he opened them, thrust them into his pockets, and said almost to himself, “Yes, I might have known that that was bound to come out.”

Hilary got slowly out of the engulfing chair. He could not have heard aright; he must reduce the distance between them. “What was bound to come out?” he whispered, and then louder, beseechingly, “It wasn't you there, Denzil, in the Cotswolds? It may have been your car, but it wasn't you driving it? . . . Or *did* you go to try and see Milburn?”

Denzil was still silent, his hands in his pockets, looking at the floor.

“For God's sake, Denzil, don't keep me in suspense like this! Tell me the truth!”

Denzil took his hands out of his pockets, picked up the garage note from the mantelpiece and folded it neatly up. The action was a little hurried, but his hands were perfectly steady. Then he looked Hilary in the face.

"Now that you know so much I see that I shall have to tell you the rest. It's not your fault that you do. That's Milburn's doing—like so much else. I haven't been keeping you purposely on tenterhooks, Hilary; if I could avoid it I would not put you in the awkward position of being an accessory after the fact, but with Milburn on the scent too . . ."

Hilary put out a hand to the mantelpiece. "The fact, Denzil! The *fact*?"

"Yes, the fact," said Folyat firmly. "It's got to be faced—I mean I'm afraid you've got to face it—I wish you hadn't." Then, as Hilary, almost stunned, laid his head on the arm which clutched the high mantelpiece, his friend went on with a throb of emotion for the first time in his voice, "Hilary, I swear, I swear I never meant to kill him, even to do him the slightest harm! I didn't know I had—until afterwards. It was that damned snowstorm . . . and his weak heart, perhaps."

That damned snowstorm. The very word called up in the silence a momentary vision of Chloe's little snow-scene as it stood on the mantelpiece at home. But this snowstorm was no toy blizzard shut up in a small glass globe; it had spread outwards until it had enveloped the whole world. Denzil and he were both lost, buried in it, equally with poor Jenner, Jenner whom Denzil had killed, somehow, that evening. . . .

Hilary raised a face as drawn as the face looking at him, and his voice came out in a sort of creak.

"But what did you *do*, Denzil?"

"I pushed him—he fell."

"And that was just to get this letter of Milburn's to Chloe?"

Denzil nodded. "Just for that."

"But you couldn't possibly know that he had written one

that day, and that it was in Jenner's bag at that particular time! It isn't credible—it isn't sense!"

"I did know, unfortunately," said Denzil.

"But how *could* you!" repeated Hilary incredulously.

"You remember the note from Milburn which the General's butler handed me just before we left Lincott Manor that Saturday?"

"The one you tore up? I remember it very well. But you said . . ."

"What I said wasn't quite the truth. That note was more than a threat—it was an ultimatum. It informed me that unless Milburn heard, not later than the following Wednesday, that I had broken off my engagement to his cousin Chloe, he would then write and tell her about Madame d'Azelles."

"But you told me he had promised not to!"

"Ah, that came later. I'd better tell you the whole thing, from beginning to end. Look here, sit down, old chap—it'll take a little time." He pushed him gently back into his chair, but himself remained standing.

"Well, after we got back to London, you and I, on that Saturday, I answered that note. I wrote to Milburn in Gloucestershire (he had given me the address) and told him that I'd see him in hell first, and what I thought of his choice of a weapon. About Chloe I did nothing. Perhaps you will say that my only safe course would have been to tell her myself without loss of time, but I couldn't stomach the idea of being forced into it at Milburn's bidding—and perhaps even forced unnecessarily; for I couldn't really quite believe that he would be such a hound as to do what he threatened. It was in this mood that I went off to Ely on the Monday as arranged.

"But soon I was finding it harder and harder to take

no action and just wait for the blow to fall, if it was going to. Because you see, Hilary, though I pretended to you the other evening (in order to put you off the scent) that I was not particularly concerned at the idea of Chloe's learning of that episode in Touraine, I was—very much concerned. I knew that she had not the modern attitude towards such matters. It would have been a great shock to her—frankly I wasn't at all sure what the results might be. By midday on Wednesday I could bear inaction no longer, and the prospect of her learning the story from Milburn seemed more intolerable than ever. I had heard nothing more from him, though I had given him my address; so I determined to drive down to Staneley and make another attempt to stop him. In the last resort I was prepared, if he was still obdurate, to undertake to tell Chloe myself.

"Well, it was a difficult cross-country journey, the weather was vile, and before I got to the Cotswolds it was snowing. I hadn't even a detailed map, and I lost my way more than once before finding Staneley. It was then about half-past five, getting dusk and snowing harder. I reached Staneley Court only to learn, as you have heard, that Milburn and his host had left for London that afternoon on account of the snow. I got back into the car feeling desperate, and wondered what more I could do. Should I try to follow Milburn to London—or would it be better to telegraph or telephone, asking him to hold his hand until he had seen me? But since this *was* Wednesday, February 1st, there was always the possibility that he had already written and despatched a letter to Chloe before he left . . .

"And then, as I drove slowly along the road, my headlights picked out through the falling snowflakes the figure

of a postman just turning away from a little red letter-box attached to a telegraph pole. He crossed the road and vanished, and when I got to the spot I saw a lane on my left, and realised that he must have gone up it. I was past this lane before it occurred to me that Milburn might possibly have posted a letter to Chloe in that box before starting for London; it was probably the nearest one to Staneley Court. Suddenly the fatal idea came to me to go after the postman and try to find out. I stopped the car and got out, because it seemed quicker to go on foot than to turn there and perhaps find myself in a snow-covered ditch. I ran the few yards back and up the lane, and as I went I decided I would say to the postman that a letter of my own addressed to a Miss Page had, I believed, been posted by mistake in that box, and would he let me have it back? I hoped that he would at least look and see whether he had it, and then I should know one way or the other. I must tell you," added Folyat, parenthetically, "that it never entered my head to connect this unknown country postman with your visits to Charton, because, not knowing the Cotswolds, I did not realise that Staneley and Charton were adjacent villages. For one thing, Staneley, by the address given me, was in Gloucestershire, and I always thought the place you went to was in Oxon; so that even if I had taken in that your protégé there was a postman, which I don't think I had, I should not have expected to come upon him collecting in Staneley in Gloucestershire."

"As a matter of fact," said Hilary, "the county boundary runs between Charton and Staneley, but that box at Crutchley's Corner is in the Charton postal area. . . . Yes, go on!"

"I soon caught up the postman," went on Denzil, "and

put the question to him which I had planned. Not unnaturally he was surprised, but after a little demur he opened his bag, fished up the handful of letters he had in it and turned them over in the light of his lantern. After a moment he said, 'Is this it, sir?' and read out Chloe's name and address. I got nearer and was able to see that damnable neat writing of Milburn's; he had been as good—or as bad—as his word! Nothing in the world mattered then but that I should prevent that letter reaching her.

"I asked the postman if he could see his way to let me have my letter back—I knew I must pretend that *I* was the writer—seeing that it had been posted when it should not have been. He objected, saying that it was against regulations; but I thought he was hesitating. Then I made a mistake; I pulled out a ten-shilling note."

"Yes, that would never have been the way to get round Jenner," said Hilary sadly.

"I saw that at once. He said indignantly, 'No, I don't take bribes, sir! You can't have this letter!' and lifted the flap of his unfastened bag—he had already returned the rest of the letters, and I saw that Milburn's was just going to join them . . ." Denzil paused.

"It was too easy, Hilary. I had only to put out my hand . . . In a second I had done it, snatched the letter from him, at the same time—to prevent his grabbing me—giving him a push which toppled him over at the side of the lane. Then I took to my heels.

"I heard nothing behind me, and in a minute or two I had jumped into the car and was off along the road. Of course I realised almost at once that I had done a crazy thing, but I was so elated at having checkmated Milburn, for the moment at least, that I didn't worry much

about the possible consequences to myself of having robbed His Majesty's mail and assaulted a postman—I never for an instant dreamt that I had done him any real harm. Still, I knew I had better get away as quickly as possible.


"But that was not so easy. The snow was now beginning to lie thickly; I had no chains, nor did I know the roads. I did not want to draw attention to myself by asking anyone for directions—besides I hardly met a soul. I couldn't keep the windscreen clear of the flakes, and very soon it was quite dark. In fact it was rather a nightmare drive, but somehow or other, though once I nearly got stuck for good, I managed to keep moving and on the road, which went up, then down, then up endlessly into more and more snow. Finally, in a blizzard, I crawled into what I found was Chipping Norton, and all but overturned the Bentley in that tilted main street. It was impossible to get farther, and, not wishing for several reasons to abandon the car, I decided against trying to go on by train that night. I thought I might be able to get on next morning in daylight and a possible thaw. So I garaged the car—even that was difficult enough to do—and spent the night at a commercial hotel.

"And then, while I was waiting for a meal, I at last had an opportunity of opening the letter I had stolen."

Denzil paused, looked down at the fire and drove his heel into it. Then he laughed, but quite mirthlessly.

"Well?" said Hilary.

"There was nothing whatever in it but apologies for having upset Chloe on the previous Saturday at Lincott Manor."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HILARY sat up with a jerk, stupefaction on his face. "Denzil! Then you'd done all this for nothing!"

"Yes. A pretty stroke of irony, wasn't it? Not the only one, as you'll see in this tale." Folyat abandoned his place by the mantelpiece and sat down in the other chair. "Well, that sobered me, as you may imagine. I began to consider my position. It came to me then that I had heard that stealing or suppressing a letter was a felony punishable with penal servitude; yet now that I had torn Milburn's open there was of course nothing to be done but to destroy it. And since I never imagined that the postman had suffered any harm from my push—as I say, it was in no sense a blow, and the snow would ensure a soft fall—I did not doubt but that he would immediately report my attack and my theft of a letter . . . and I had not been able to put much distance between myself and the scene of my misdeed.

"But the same weather which was holding me up might hold up any police researches too, and, just because of the snow, I stood, I thought, a fair chance of not being traced at all. The postman, I remembered, could hardly have seen what sort of car I was driving. There had been no witnesses of our encounter, so that even if I were traced and accused it would only be his word against mine, for I should of course deny all knowledge of the matter. But even if it were not brought home to me, any investigation on the part of the police would probably lead them to Chloe, and the whole business from A to Z might become

public property. That thought troubled me horribly.

"However by next morning no policeman had appeared. On the other hand there was no improvement, rather the reverse, in the weather, so that there was no question of getting back to Ely by car. Thinking it better not to reappear in person in those parts, I arranged at the garage for a competent man to drive the car to London directly the weather had sufficiently improved, and I went by rail back to Ely via Oxford. The trains were all very late, and after an interminable journey I got back to the "Phoenix" about four o'clock on Thursday afternoon. The tale about Norwich which I invented to cover my tracks I gather you know.

"And awaiting me at the "Phoenix" was a letter from Milburn, written in London on the Wednesday night after his return, saying rather stiffly that at the last moment he had decided to refrain from telling Chloe what he knew, now or at any time. So you see that if I had stuck to my first resolution and done nothing at all . . ."

Again Denzil broke off, and they looked at each other in silence. "All for nothing, all for nothing!" rang in Hilary's head like a chant, against which he heard with a stupid surprise his own voice ask after a moment, "Did Milburn give any reason for changing his mind?"

"No, none at all. It is to be presumed that he was ashamed of his intention. I suppose that when he actually sat down to write to Chloe he got no farther than the apologies with which he began."

"If he hadn't begun at all there would have been no letter from him in Jenner's bag," said Hilary bitterly. "The whole thing is damnable, absolutely damnable!—But how long was it before you knew that Jenner was missing? I suppose you saw it in the newspaper—I know you

never listen to the wireless."

"No, I didn't," answered Folyat. "I know it seems inconceivable, considering that I scoured the papers for any news of an assault by an unknown man on a postman, but somehow I never saw that a postman was missing, though I suppose it must have been in some of the papers I searched. Actually the first I knew of it was when you told me on the Friday evening at the *Panier d'Oranges*—when I learnt also that he was your friend Jenner of Charton-under-Wold."

"You didn't know till I told you!" said Hilary in amazement. "Good heavens, Denzil!—And you didn't give yourself away!"

"I rather feared I had," said Folyat, with a wry smile. "For of course it was a terrible shock. But at first I was very far from admitting to myself that Jenner's disappearance was due to me. It didn't seem possible! But later, when I read the account of the inquest, and learnt that his body had been found, not up on the wolds, as I had assumed it would be, but in that very lane off the high road at the spot where we had our interview—after that there was no possibility of doubt. I really *had* killed him!"

"You can't say that, Denzil," said Hilary, miserably. "It was only because the poor chap's heart was so groggy—you read the doctor's evidence? But for that he would surely have picked himself up again."

"I dare say the shock of being knocked over did bring on a heart attack, and there must have been a snow-filled ditch behind him which I didn't see. You must remember that it was deep dusk and snowing steadily. But all that doesn't really make me any less responsible for his death."

"But, Denzil," said Hilary clutching at another straw, "what about the threatening letter and the person whom

Jenner heard following him in the fog some days before?"

"*Thought* he heard—we don't *know* that there was any one there. Neither do we know that there were threats in the letter. Didn't you tell me, that evening on the telephone, that Mrs. Jenner never actually saw it? Anyway it is quite obvious that neither letter nor footsteps had anything to do with Jenner's death at my hands. God knows I have tried hard enough to escape from the conviction of my own guilt, but there is no getting away from it."

Denzil sighed wearily, but before Hilary could find anything to say, he added in a reflective tone, "Strange, isn't it, that Mrs. Jenner, in suspecting foul play, arrived at the right conclusion, though from totally wrong premisses."

"It wasn't foul play," muttered Hilary. "It was pure accident."

"No jury would call it that!" Folyat's voice was grim. Then, as Hilary was beginning a protest, he went on quickly, "Of course I soon realised that Jenner's death had saved me from any risk of being had up for a felony; and though, after the verdict at the inquest, there was equally little fear—or so I thought—of my being accused of manslaughter as well, I want you to believe, Hilary, that relief was very far from being my uppermost thought. The knowledge of what I had done was overwhelming. You can have no idea, for instance, how difficult I found it to write you that note of sympathy—I tore up two drafts. I felt such a hypocrite . . . yet my sympathy was sincere enough, and it would have seemed so strange to you if I had not expressed any after Jenner's body had been found. But I stayed on at Lincott Manor chiefly because I dreaded meeting you. Then when I did come back to town, all your sleuthing and trying to help poor Mrs. Jenner by proving that her husband had not been mur-

dered was pretty well hell!"

"Then why, in God's name," said Hilary with a groan, "did you advise me to go to Winridge?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't find the solution there, and I thought that might satisfy you, as well as Mrs. Jenner. But you weren't satisfied, and the affair went on and on in an almost childish way, which for me became nearly unbearable. Do you remember the evening when I crushed poor Quentin so unmercifully, and you said that the subject of Jenner's death must be a good deal more painful to you than it could be to me! Was it my bad temper about it which first aroused your suspicions of me? But no, I suppose you never would have got on to me if it hadn't been for that unspeakable Milburn?"

The one second during which Hilary hesitated was enough for Denzil.

"You did suspect me," he flashed, "*before* Milburn wrote? In heaven's name, why?"

"I hate telling you," said the wretched Hilary. "It began with Quentin; he evolved some ridiculous theory that if anyone had killed Jenner, he would never be able to hear a postman's knock without giving himself away. And as it happened, that evening when you told me about Madame d'Azelles, and the postman came with a registered letter, you . . ." He stopped because Denzil had broken into the semblance of a laugh.

"I was afraid you had noticed something," he said. "And so you thought it was remorse that was affecting me. It wasn't—at that moment—it was something like panic. For two days I had been expecting the police, and when that knock came I thought they were at the door."

"Expecting the police!" repeated Hilary blankly. "But you've just said that the verdict of death by misadventure

made you practically safe, and you knew nothing that evening of Milburn's suspicions. Even I didn't; it was before I got his letters."

"Oh, the half has not been told you yet," declared Denzil with a sudden access of flippancy. "My period of fancied security came to an end exactly a fortnight ago yesterday—the last day of February—when I too got a letter. Like you I destroyed it, but like you I can repeat it verbatim. It's short enough. This was it.

'To Mr. Denzil Folyat. If you do not wish it known where you were and what you were doing up a lane in the Cotswolds in the snow about 5.30 on the evening of Wednesday February 1st, send £300 in pound notes to X.Y.Z., care of Mr. Smith, 34 Freeman Street, Pimlico, before midnight next Thursday, March 2nd.'"

"But, Denzil," said Hilary aghast, "that's blackmail! Someone else knows or suspects; for it can't be Milburn, can it? He wouldn't demand money.—What did you do?"

"Nothing; and I'm afraid that the esteemed X.Y.Z. must have been disappointed, because I had the pleasure of a second letter, three days later, in which he put up his terms and added a definite threat. He said:

'You are very unwise to have taken no notice of my previous communication. Unless you send £500 at once, a letter giving exact information as to the circumstances of D.J.'s death will go to Scotland Yard on Monday. X.Y.Z.'"

Hilary was more than ever aghast. "This is awful!"

he exclaimed. . . . "But, Denzil, no police *have* been. . . ?"

"No, not yet."

"Then this blackmailer hasn't informed Scotland Yard. What Monday was that? I'm getting mixed."

"Last Monday week. You can't have forgotten it—it was the day I played fast and loose with Chloe, and gave Milburn an opportunity to blackguard me in front of you, and also, as you now tell me, to find out about the loss of his letter. Now you can perhaps appreciate the frame of mind I was in just then. It was on a cowardly impulse, really, that I had swept Chloe off on the previous Saturday to my uncle's. But when I was there I thought that it would be even worse to have the police coming after me at Haslemere, so I hurried her back again on the Monday, having indeed promised to take her to the Russian dancers that evening. By lunch time, however, I was feeling so played out with want of sleep and anxiety that I was afraid I couldn't keep up appearances in front of her, so I rang her up and cried off; I hardly remember what I said, but I don't believe I gave any excuse. Then I must have fallen asleep in this chair; when I woke I felt better physically, and after a while I swung round to wanting to be with her again in spite of everything. (I admit I didn't show *her* much consideration in all this.) So I came for her after all—and you know what happened then."

"That scene with Milburn. I wonder you didn't go for him! But, Denzil, as nothing has happened in these ten days, surely it is quite obvious that the blackmailer has not carried out his threat of informing Scotland Yard, which means that he isn't in a position to—blackmailers rarely venture to carry out their threats if the police are involved. You've called his bluff by taking no notice of his two

letters and that's an end of him."

"My dear Hilary, it's kind of you to be so optimistic. He still exists, and we can't be certain that the police are not being active the whole time. How do we know that Scotland Yard are not now investigating down at Charton, and hearing all about Mrs. Jenner's suspicions of foul play? I may still be arrested at any moment. And anyway X.Y.Z. will make *some* use of what he knows, and that he knows something pretty damning is obvious—though I can't conceive of any means by which he has gained his knowledge."

"You are sure no one passed you in the lane that evening?"

"Quite sure. I must have become aware of it."

"Then perhaps someone saw you leave the highroad and go up the lane?"

"That of course I can't answer for—though I didn't see a soul in the road; but unless they came actually up the lane and fairly close they couldn't have seen or heard anything. Remember again that it was dusk and snowing. No, I am sure there was nobody about. . . . However, it's waste of time to speculate on how X.Y.Z. knows; he does know . . . and knows more, evidently, than he has put into writing. And now Milburn is on my track too! So you see, Hilary, I can't go on like this. I'm not going to wait for an enemy like Milburn and a scoundrelly black-mailer to haul me to justice between them. I shall go to Scotland Yard myself."

"Denzil, you must be mad!" exclaimed Hilary, horrified. "You can't throw up the sponge like that! . . . Milburn is *hors de combat* for the moment—and anyway he's only guessing because he hates you—and because he knows of a possible motive. He's got no evidence whatever, and very likely the blackmailer has none either. To go and play

their game like that, it's . . . it's . . ."

"Cowardly, you were going to say, I think?"

"No, I wasn't. I was going to say that it wasn't like you!"

Folyat leant his head back against the chair. He looked worn out but rather more peaceable, thought Hilary, scanning him. "But I don't quite know myself now what manner of man I am," he said in a quiet, faintly puzzled tone. "Fast becoming an accomplished liar, anyhow! But I am rather weary of it. Besides it isn't only dislike of being hunted down that inclines me to take this way out. If one were innocent one would fight to the last. But I haven't by any means lost sight of the fact that, but for my crazy act, Jenner would be alive now. I know it's unfashionable to-day to own to a conscience, but it still seems to exist, though to admit it lays a man open to one of the most damning of all charges—that of sentimentality. I have never thought of myself as a sentimentalist, but, as I say, one makes queer discoveries about oneself."

"Of course everybody's got a conscience!" said Hilary squarely. "But giving yourself up won't bring Jenner back, or do any good to a soul! On the contrary it will cause the most terrible distress to all sorts of people . . . and quite uselessly. . . . Denzil, you *can't*, because of Chloe!"

Denzil suddenly got up and stood with his back turned by the table which bore the *épergne*. He was silent for a moment, fingering its fluted convolutions.

"I offered Chloe her freedom this afternoon," he said at last, "and she accepted it."

The words rang unmeaningly to Hilary for a moment, then, as their significance reached him, he had a queer sensation that Denzil's tall figure and the table with the *épergne* were all sliding away from him as things slide on a revolving stage. After that there was a

noise like water gushing . . .

Actually however, Denzil was nearer, not farther away, and the liquid sound was explained, for he was stooping over him with a glass in his hand.

"It's time I offered you a drink, isn't it?" he said. "I've been lavish enough with shocks this evening."

Disregarding the proffered tumbler, Hilary said, in a sort of whisper, "You don't really mean that your engagement is at an end?"

"It is, quite definitely. Now take this, there's a good fellow. And do you know what time it is—after eight. I think we should both be the better for something to eat. I told Dawson to have some supper ready in case we wanted it. Or would you rather go out and dine?"

Hilary, accepting the glass, shook his head, and Denzil, saying, "I'll just speak to Dawson," left the room.

Hilary sat without moving, dazed, looking at the glass in his hand. *This*—after all the rest! No, none of it could be true; he'd had a smash, a blow on the head or something. Better drink some of this stuff. Quite difficult to get the tumbler to his lips, but he managed it . . . and wished he had not. For the whisky—there was very little soda in the mixture—seemed to clear his brain only too efficaciously. If Denzil had taken such an extreme step as the breaking of his engagement—thrown away his own happiness and Chloe's—it made the reason for his action loom most horribly near and real.

"Dawson has some soup for us as well as something cold," reported Folyat, returning. "It will be ready in a couple of minutes. I find, after recent experience, that it doesn't pay in the end not to bother about meals."

Hilary made a great effort and emptied his glass. His brain seemed to clear a little more. "Denzil," he said

with difficulty, "you didn't of course tell . . . Chloe about Jenner?"

Denzil went over to the writing-table and locked up a drawer before replying. "No," he answered in a perfectly expressionless voice, "it didn't need it. She thought herself that it was a mistake, on general grounds, for our engagement to go on. And that perhaps is fortunate, because it has brought about a voluntary-seeming break—and break there has to be before I am arrested, or give myself up . . . or take a shorter way out," he finished almost to himself. "Come on, Hilary, let's go and eat."

And presently Hilary found himself sitting at table in Denzil's delightful little dining-room with a soup-spoon in his hand. Everything seemed to shine—silver candlesticks, Waterford glass, the polished table—all dazzled him. Denzil's face between the candle flames looked as pale as the dead; yet he was smiling a little, and Dawson, comfortably "butlerine" in aspect, was pouring out sherry.

Hilary took a mouthful or two of the excellent soup and was glad of it. But almost immediately he laid down his spoon.

Denzil saw it. "You can go till I ring for you, Dawson," he said instantly, and his man withdrew. "Get on with your soup, Hilary!" His tone was gentle. Glancing an instant or two later across the table he saw that Hilary had not obeyed him. "Well, drink off that sherry then. It's——"

Hilary had pushed back his chair a little. "Denzil!"
"Well?"

"Denzil—how do you suppose I can sit here eating and drinking after you have said a thing like that!"

"Like what?— Look here, would you rather have Madeira?"

"Oh, for God's sake don't be hospitable now!" burst out Hilary, strung up to explosion pitch. "I mean, about the shorter way out. Take it back—say you didn't mean it! Because it's quite intolerable!" He was on his feet now.

Denzil rose quickly and came round to him. There was real concern on his face.

"My poor Hilary! Your hearing is too good! That was only a piece of cowardly bravado on my part, addressed to my private self. I didn't mean it. We will think of some other expedient . . . if you'll only sit down and go on with your supper.—No, I expect that soup is cold by now. I'll ring and see what Dawson has for the next course.—Is that a pact?"

Hilary shut his eyes for a moment, opened them, drew a long breath and said, "Yes." Then he sat down, drained the glass of sherry, and after that Denzil rang the bell.

It was half an hour later, over coffee and cigars. Things did look a little less dark after a good meal, and Hilary had more or less succeeded in arguing Denzil out of the idea of giving himself up, and was now urging him to go abroad for a while.

"You will seriously consider that possibility then, won't you?"

"I never met anyone so pertinacious as you! Well, perhaps—but only on one condition, that you don't insist on my shooting big game!"

"Why should I?" asked Hilary, puzzled.

"Only because in novels a man always does that after being . . . 'crossed in love' as the phrase is."

"But that's not the reason for your going," said Hilary uncomfortably. "You would be leaving England so as to

be out of the way just in case the Jenner business is reopened."

"But everyone will think that it is for the other reason that I have gone; and on the whole it's as well that they should. But even so I absolutely refuse to go and slaughter hippopotami or moufflon.—I might do some climbing somewhere or other, perhaps."

"Climbing?" said Hilary doubtfully, suddenly seeing a very nasty little picture. . . . "Not at this time of year, surely? I think you'd better go for a voyage."

"Just as easy to disappear into the sea as down a crevasse," said Denzil disconcertingly. "Oh, I can read your rather melodramatic thoughts, my dear Hilary!" He smiled. "But I told you that I didn't mean what I said. I won't take the coward's way out, I promise you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HILARY got to sleep that night somewhat more quickly than of late, but he had a vivid and horrible dream of Denzil, in falling snow, fencing with some unknown man on the very verge of a mountain precipice while Hilary himself, powerless to cry out a warning, had to watch him being forced backwards nearer to the abyss. He did not actually see him go over, but woke sweating, while it was still dark, to face what was worse than any nightmare.

It was Denzil, his best friend, who had killed Jenner—though without intending to; and, as if that were not bad enough in itself, the fact was somehow known to some unscrupulous person who would certainly make use of it if he could. And in view of this he no longer wondered at Denzil's breaking off his engagement, although the news of it had given him such a shock. Chloe's life was going to be wrecked on the same reef. If Denzil had not had this dreadful weight upon his mind during the early weeks of their engagement, the course of that engagement would probably have been quite different. It seemed so terribly ironic that what Denzil had gone to such lengths to save, his relation to Chloe, had been ruined by the very action he had taken to preserve it! If Milburn *had* written and told the girl about Madame d'Azelles, things could not possibly be worse; and if she had received the letter, Denzil would not now be in danger of penal servitude. So oppressed was Hilary by the conviction of the tragedy which this meant to both of them, that it had not yet

entered his head that the way was now clear for him to try, at some future time, whether he could win Chloe for himself.

He dropped off to sleep again before he was called, and had the pleasure of waking up a second time to find the same spectre by his bedside.

At breakfast, after Quentin had departed for school, Rosalind, who the previous day had abstained from any reference to the untoward happening of the night before last, suddenly broke her silence.

"Hilary, you must forgive me, but I really can't see you looking so wretched and go on pretending not to notice it! I suppose it's that business on Tuesday. Haven't you been able to put that right with Denzil?"

To her surprise her brother looked up from a letter and replied, "Oh, yes, we've settled that. I spent all yesterday evening with him, as a matter of fact."

"Then whatever is the matter with you? You look nearly as bad as he did that night!"

"Well, you see, Rose, I'm worried because Denzil——" Hilary began slowly, and then stopped. He had been going to say, "——is in terrible trouble, though I can't tell you what it is," but was brought up short by the reflection that he had better not admit as much, even to Rosalind.

"Look here, Rose," he said hurriedly, "be a sport and don't ask me any more. I simply can't tell you now." Then he saw, or thought he saw the question coming, "Has it anything to do with Chloe?" and rather than face it he got up hurriedly, with a glance at the clock, and muttering, "I shall be late," practically bolted from the room.

Nine hours later, back from the War Office, he had his hand on the gate of Number 6 when he heard a voice behind him.

"Excuse me, sir, but could I have a word with you?" it said, quite respectfully.

Hilary looked round. On the pavement before him, in the fading light, stood a rather shabby middle-aged man wearing a short and dirty Burberry.

"What do you want?" he enquired. On the heels of this question came the remembrance of Quentin's almost forgotten watcher in a Burberry. Could this be the same man? Then Hilary remembered something else. "If you are that old servant of General Page's who wanted to see Miss Page, she has left here now," he said.

Was it imagination, or did a faint, not very pleasant grin appear at those words upon the man's face? But he only said, with the same respect, "No, sir, it's not a lady I want. I should like to speak to you, because I believe you took an interest in the case of that postman in the Cotswolds who was found dead in the snow some weeks ago."

Hilary's hand dropped from the gate. Was he becoming mental, and imagining that the very passers-by in the street were talking about the one problem? But no—the man had actually spoken . . . and was waiting for an answer.

"Yes, I did," replied Hilary slowly. "But what's that got to do with you?"

The man came still nearer and lowered his voice. "I can tell you, sir, what really happened to him."

Hilary's heart missed a beat. But he steadied himself quickly. "I know what happened. He walked into a snow-drift, poor fellow."

This time he was certain that the man half smiled. "Do you really believe that, sir? I can tell you different."

A shiver which was not caused by the March wind ran through Hilary. He was conscious of a strong desire to

tell the man to go to the devil, and himself bolt into the house. But he dared not. He must find out what the fellow meant. Was this Denzil's blackmailer, or yet another person who *knew*? He said curtly, "Well, I can't stand out here in the cold to talk. You'd better come in for a moment."

As he put his key into the latch he remembered with thankfulness that Rosalind would be at Quentin's dancing class this evening, and that neither of them would be back much before dinner time.

In his den, having shut the door carefully, he took a good look at his visitor, standing hat in hand in the middle of the room. He saw a rather powerfully built man of above medium height, with grizzled dark hair and a pale, squarish face, where a truncated moustache made a little patch of blackness under the nose.

"Well, now, who are you, and how do you come to know anything about the postman's death—if you do know anything?" demanded Hilary.

"It don't matter who I am, sir, nor how I know," responded the man with rather more assurance and less respect. His voice was husky and unpleasant, with a suggestion of an accent which Hilary could not place. "The point is, do you want to hear what I've got to tell you?"

"Get on with it, then," said Hilary shortly.

The man cleared his throat. "I'm afraid you'll have to make it worth my while first, sir. It would be worth your while too," he added meaningly.

Hilary surveyed him with angry distaste. "Is this blackmail? If so, I shall telephone for the police and give you in charge!"

His visitor appeared quite unperturbed by this threat. "No, sir, it's not blackmail. I'm not threatening you in any

way. It's only that I've got something to sell, and I think you are the gentleman to buy it."

"I?" said Hilary. "Why? If you have anything to add to the evidence at the inquest why don't you go to the police with it?"

"Because it's very much in the interests of a certain gentleman, a friend of yours" (he stressed the words) "that I shouldn't."

This was undoubtedly Denzil's blackmailer! Hilary's first impulse was to accuse him of the crime which he had just so glibly repudiated. But on second thoughts this seemed too dangerous. His cue was to affect complete ignorance and indignation.

"A friend of mine!" he exclaimed. "What the devil do you mean? How dare you say such a thing? Do you want me to throw you out?"

"It's no good going on like that, sir," replied the man in the Burberry, and there was not much subservience in his tone now. "Do you want to hear the truth about the postman's death, or don't you? It's only a question of money!"

("Shall I turn him out?" asked Hilary of himself. "No, I must discover what he really knows.") "How much do you want for your cock-and-bull story?" he asked in disgust.

The reply was prompt. "Ten quid for telling you, Mr. Severn, and twenty for not telling anyone else!"

"That *is* blackmail!" retorted Hilary scornfully.

"I shouldn't have put it that way, then. Thirty quid for giving you the information, and done with it!"

"I'll give you five pounds, and not a penny more!" said Hilary. "I haven't that much in the house at the moment, either."

He was resolved to be firm on this point, because however much he gave the fellow he knew he could not be sure of stopping his mouth. He was only offering the five pounds for his own satisfaction—if satisfaction it could be called.

"I suppose you're being funny, saying that!" sneered his visitor. "Five quid—the idea of it!"

"It's that or nothing!" repeated Hilary with much firmness.

The man put his hat on his head. "Then I'll be saying good-evening, Mr. Severn."

"Very well," said Hilary, with a good assumption of nonchalance, "I'll see you out."

They faced each other for a moment, Hilary very far indeed from indifference. Although he longed to see the man's back, he also had a desire, impossible of gratification, to lock him up in the coal-cellar or something of the sort. At liberty, he was horribly dangerous; yet he could not keep him prisoner.

"How much have you got handy?" asked the "black-mailer" suddenly.

Hilary went to his writing-table and turned out his pockets, finding a harvest of thirty-two shillings and sevenpence. The destined recipient watched the process rather contemptuously.

"Haven't you any more than *that*?" he demanded hoarsely.

"No, I haven't!" retorted Hilary, whose temper was rising, "but if you'll come back to-morrow evening about this time I'll give you the balance of the five pounds."

"Oh, yes, I dare say! Come back and walk into the arms of a couple of cops!—Not that they could do anything to me. I've not been demanding money with threats."

"Perhaps not, but if there was foul play in the case of the postman, and you know of it, aren't you an accessory after the fact?—Still, I promise you there shall be no trap for you here to-morrow."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said the man sarcastically. "But if I've got to come again, it will be ten pounds."

"It will not. It will be the balance of the five pounds," repeated Hilary doggedly.

His visitor glared. "Shouldn't have guessed you was so hard up, living in a nice little house like this! If I weren't pretty well on my uppers. . . . Here goes then!" He held out his hand for the money, counted it over and pocketed it. Then, watching Hilary intently, he said with deliberation:

"It was your fine friend Mr. Denzil Folyat shoved that poor chap into the snowdrift and did him in!"

Hilary had made his face stony. After all he had been pretty sure that this was coming. In a convinced but quiet tone he retorted, "You are mad, quite mad! But go on—the rest."

"That's all, sir. Ain't it enough?"

"Oh, dear me, no! Even an absurd accusation like that can't be made without some attempt at evidence to support it—though of course you can have none, seeing that the gentleman you mention was more than a hundred miles away, in East Anglia, at the time."

"Mr. Folyat wasn't 'more than a hundred miles away' at half-past five on the evening of February 1st; he was there in the lane at Crutchley's Corner at Staneley in the Cotswolds! And what was he doing there? Why, knocking the postman into a snowdrift because he wouldn't give him back a letter he wanted. He got the letter, too!"

It was not so easy for Hilary to keep his face stony at

that. He had not expected such precise and accurate knowledge. How *could* the man before him have acquired it?

"*Give him back a letter!*" he repeated with the best show of assurance that he could muster. "What nonsense! You are inventing this rubbish!"

"Oh, no, I'm not, sir—and you know it! I can see this news isn't as much of a surprise to you as I thought it would be! *You've* no call to talk about 'accessory after the fact!'" His tone now was little short of insolent.

"You had better be careful what you are saying," retorted Hilary. "If Jenner's death was not an accident and someone killed him, you couldn't know unless you had witnessed the crime. And in that case, why didn't you interfere?"

For the first time the man in the Burberry looked a little disconcerted. "Oh no, I didn't witness it, sir," he said hurriedly. "No, nothing of the sort!"

"Then your tale is just a slanderous invention, and I warn you——"

"There's other ways of knowing besides being there yourself," broke in the other. "Maybe someone else was there, or maybe Mr. Folyat gave himself away. Some folks when they've anything on their minds have been known to talk in their sleep. . . . Well, Mr. Severn, I have your word for it that if I come to-morrow evening you'll give me the balance of what you owe me, and no detectives listening in from another room. Not that I'd worry about that," he added with an offensive smile, "because you daren't breathe a word about me to the police, on account of Mr. Folyat."

("Don't keep on saying that name, damn you!" muttered Hilary to himself.) "If you come," he said, taking no open notice of this remark, "you'll get the balance of

the money. Now I've no more to say to you, and you can go!"

When he had shut the front door on the departing Burberry, Hilary stood a moment reflecting, then he went to the telephone and dialled the number of Folyat's flat.

"But, Denzil, how *can* he know so much?"

"Not through my talking in my sleep, that I swear!" replied Folyat scornfully. "The idea is preposterous. I never talk in my sleep!"

It was nine o'clock that evening, and Denzil, closeted with Hilary, had just received a full account of the interview which had taken place a couple of hours earlier in this same room.

"But you can't know for certain that you don't, can you?" suggested his friend rather deprecatingly. "And even if you had never done so before, you might perhaps have talked in your sleep in . . . in the special circumstances."

"And if I had, who should overhear me?" demanded Denzil. "My man is one of the soundest sleepers in the universe—one of the original seven from Ephesus, I sometimes suspect. Besides, he'd never dream of coming into my room in the middle of the night unless I rang for him."

"No, it doesn't seem likely that he heard anything. But you were not sleeping in your flat at first. What about the hotel at Chipping Norton, or the "Phoenix" at Ely, after you got back there?"

"Again impossible; I lock my door in hotels. Besides, remember that I hadn't Jenner's *death* on my conscience then—only the stealing of the letter. No, Hilary, you can dismiss that idea; the fellow only put it forward as a blind."

And Hilary, being more or less of the same opinion, did not suggest the possibility, which occurred to him, that someone might have overheard Denzil talking in his sleep at Lincott Manor, where he did know what he had done—for it was there that he had seen the account of the inquest in the newspapers.

"Well, then," he said, "the only alternative is, that in spite of his denials this man *was* in the lane that night, and saw what happened."

"My dear fellow, we've been into that already!" said Denzil rather testily. "I have told you that it is impossible!"

"Then the source of his knowledge must somehow be Milburn. He is the only person who *could* have known about the letter, and therefore the only person in a position to guess what might have happened. And, as we know, he has guessed."

"But what about the claims of chronology? According to you, Milburn only learnt of the non-delivery of his letter last Monday week, but both X.Y.Z.'s epistles reached me the week before!"

Hilary frowned. "Of course! Stupid of me! Besides, it's not really quite conceivable that even Milburn would have dealings with a fellow like that!"

"No, not even Milburn!" agreed Denzil very dryly. "But if this man knows so much, no matter how he knows it, the game is pretty well up, and even if I run away abroad, I shall only be hauled back again. Though I admit," he added a moment later, "that after what I have learnt to-day, I feel uncommonly like bolting."

"What do you mean?" asked Hilary sharply. "Not that the police——"

"I know nothing of what the police are up to. But I know a little more about what may happen to me if they

arrest me. The charge *may* be murder, not manslaughter!"

"Nonsense!" said Hilary almost fiercely. "That's morbid! To make it murder there must be some harm intended—and you only pushed Jenner. Don't for God's sake make the business out worse than it is already!"

"I've no wish to, I assure you," said Denzil soberly. "But you are forgetting that I was already engaged on the commission of a felony when I gave him that push."

"How can that affect the question?" Hilary's tone was not that of an enquirer, but of one brushing aside a suggestion.

Denzil was taking out his pocket-book. He now extracted from it a slip of paper. "Listen," he said, and began to read:

"Where a person whilst committing or attempting to commit a felony does an act which is known to be dangerous to life and likely in itself to cause death, and the death of another person results as a consequence of that act, though not intended by the person committing it, the law implies malice aforethought and the person causing the death is guilty of murder.' *Though not intended by the person committing it,*" repeated Denzil meaningly.

Hilary had turned white. "Where did you get that from?"

"From the ninth volume of Halsbury's *Laws of England*. I copied it and more to much the same effect in the British Museum this afternoon, because at lunch to-day with Charles Wilmer, a man I know slightly, a barrister, happened to say something about a recent trial for burglary with violence which rather suggested what I have just found to be the fact. I dared not ask him about it in so many words, so I went and did a little research on my own account. You can read this for yourself, and then perhaps

I'd better put it in the fire."

Hilary studied the extract. "But a mere push, Denzil!" he said rather shakily. "How could a mere push be 'dangerous to life and likely in itself to cause death'? No jury could possibly consider that it was!"

"Wouldn't that depend on whether they believed that I had only used 'a mere push'? I cannot bring forward any witnesses. And anyway Jenner's death *did* result. You see, I should be lucky if I got off with a verdict of manslaughter."

Hilary crumpled up the paper, threw it into the fire, and jumped to his feet. "Look here, Denzil, you've *got* to start for the Continent to-night!"

Lying back in his chair, Denzil looked at his watch with a smile. "How? By chartering an aeroplane? Rather a conspicuous method of leaving!"

"In the morning, then. Denzil, you will go, won't you?"

"Isn't it exactly what a guilty person would do—try to flee the country? We didn't think of that aspect of it last night. No, I must just sit tight and wait. If only I had done that at Ely! . . . But it doesn't come easy to me."

There was no need to tell Hilary that. He stood looking down at Denzil, stretched at his ease in the shabby arm-chair. It seemed so preposterous to think that he was in real, acute danger . . . "Perhaps I am working myself up rather unduly," he conceded slowly, and not without an effort. "They cannot bring a case against you on the mere word of a blackmailing scoundrel like the man who was here to-night."

"I don't know about that. Anyhow, if I am charged I shall not deny the whole affair, as I once intended. I shall tell the exact truth. Nothing else will satisfy my own feelings now."

"You won't be charged!" asserted Hilary with a fair assumption of confidence. It was really himself whom he was trying to reassure—in order to shut out a sudden unnerving picture of that tall figure in the dock. . . . "If that were going to happen it would have happened days ago. But this man obviously dare not approach the police."

"Perhaps not," agreed Denzil, reaching out for the cigarettes. "But what about Milburn's taking a hand in the game when he gets on to his legs again?"

"He won't do anything!" said Hilary with decision. "His only object was—" But here he stopped, embarrassed. He did not want to refer to *that*.

"Quite so," said Denzil in a very mordant tone. "When he sees a certain announcement in the *Morning Post* he will no doubt be satisfied.—Why not sit down again, Hilary? I wish now that I hadn't shown you that elegant extract from Halsbury, for I don't suppose it will really come to that."

Hilary flung himself down with a cigarette, and for a few minutes both of them smoked in silence. But, though he was actually staring into the fire, Hilary seemed to see nothing but Denzil's colourless face in the chair opposite. How had he stood all this and kept going at all, he asked himself? All the apparently incalculable moods of the last few weeks were accounted for now with a vengeance! Yet this evening he was, despite his haggard appearance, much more the Denzil of old days. Was it because he had at last shared his heavy secret, or because, having lost Chloe, he did not much care what further befell him?

The door opened, and Hester, less exuberant than usual, entered with a salver in her hand. "A gentleman asking to see you, sir," she said to Hilary. "He said he would be much obliged if you could spare him a few minutes."

"I thought I told you I didn't want to be disturbed," said Hilary wearily. "'Mr. James Silver'? I know no one of the name. And what a time to come!"

"I told the gentleman you were engaged, sir," replied Hester with an aggrieved air, "but he wouldn't go away. He said he would wait till you *could* see him."

"Then I'd better do so. It will probably be the quickest way of getting rid of him. Don't go, Denzil; I'll be back directly."

The stranger was in the hall, standing with his back turned, apparently studying the large engraving of 'Coming of Age in the Olden Time' which Rosalind cherished because of a childhood spent in its company. Abandoning this scrutiny as Hilary approached, he showed himself to be about thirty-five, tall, very upright, not quite a gentleman, but well groomed and presentable.

"Mr. Hilary Severn?" he asked politely; and then, Hilary having assented, he brought something out of his waistcoat pocket, and, as the swing door to the kitchen regions shut to behind Hester, handed it to him with the words:

"This is my official card, sir. I am sorry to trouble you at this late hour, but I should be grateful for a short talk with you in private."

And Hilary all unprepared, found himself looking down at this: "Detective-Inspector Silver, New Scotland Yard."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE shock was paralysing. For an instant Hilary stood gazing stupidly at the card, while his bewildered brain tried in desperate haste to grapple with this fresh menace. The police had moved after all, were on Denzil's track—and Denzil himself was only a few yards away, smoking by the fire! Did this inspector know that? Hardly, since he wished to speak to *him*! . . . Would it be possible to make some excuse and get back to warn Denzil? But that would only precipitate disaster, for Denzil would never consent to leave the house; he would certainly insist on facing the detective himself. No, neither must know of the other's presence.

"Will you come in here, please?" said Hilary, opening the dining-room door, and, when they were both through it, shutting it with relief and a momentary impulse to lock it. But that would look very queer, and he must appear at ease—perfectly at ease. . . . The man obviously hadn't come to arrest Denzil, so he must have come to get information about him. And he, Hilary, had got to keep him at bay somehow . . . and yet not do it in such a way as to arouse his suspicions.

"Well, Inspector, what can I do for you?" he said, and hoped that his voice sounded fairly natural.

"I have called to see you, sir," replied the police officer, "in connection with a case in which the Oxford police have asked for our co-operation. I think you may be able to give me some useful information."

He paused for an instant, while Hilary thought, "Why

Oxford police? He must mean *Oxfordshire*, for Charton is in that county, even if Staneley is not. It means that he is beginning at the Jenner end of the business."

"You may have seen some account in the papers, sir," went on the Inspector, pleasantly, "of the theft in Oxford, at the beginning of February, of some valuable jewellery belonging to an American lady—a Mrs. Van Leer. That is the case in question, and I have come to you because——"

"You have come to me about a jewel robbery in Oxford!" burst out Hilary in amazement. "But what can I possibly know——" He found himself laughing, so overwhelming was his relief. "You won't find the jewels here, Inspector, and I know absolutely nothing about them!"

Inspector Silver smiled. "No, sir. Indeed I never imagined that you did. But you will no doubt be surprised to hear that you have recently been in contact with someone who, unless we are very much mistaken, *does* know—a good deal!"

Hilary stared. "That seems very unlikely! However, sit down, Inspector, and tell me all about it. Will you smoke?" He offered his cigarette case with the sensation that he must be dreaming. This was fantastic! The Inspector, it appeared, did not smoke; but they both sat down, and the detective resumed.

"I may tell you in confidence, sir, that with regard to this burglary—it *was* burglary, the house was broken into—we have reason to suspect two men. One, who is almost certainly the actual thief, we know a good deal about, but he has for the moment given us the slip, and we have not been able to trace either him or the jewels. A second man, whom we believe to be an accomplice, was traced to London, and temporarily detained. But we had no conclusive evidence of his connection with the crime.

He denied all knowledge of it, and asserted that he was not in Oxford at all on the night of Wednesday, February 1st, when it was committed. . . . Yes, sir, you wished to say something?"

For Hilary, startled by the mention of that date, had leant forward. He recovered himself, however. "No—nothing," he rejoined carelessly. "I didn't quite catch the date—but it is of no importance."

"Wednesday, the first of February," repeated the Inspector, and continued; "The man's alibi appeared to hold water, for we obtained corroboration of his statement, and therefore released him again. But we have not lost sight of him, and lately, in view of further facts which we have ascertained, we have been keeping him under observation."

"Yes, Inspector?" said Hilary, as his visitor again paused.

"Well, sir, at 6.29 this evening this man was seen to accost you outside the gate of this house. You then brought him in with you, and he remained here until 6.50. Now, sir, any information which you can give me about him and the object of his visit to you may be of material assistance to our investigations."

Having said which the Inspector came to a stop, and looked across at Hilary with a hopeful and encouraging expression.

So after all there was to be no escape in the comfortable irrelevancy of this absurd jewel robbery—which was no longer irrelevant, since somehow, inexplicably, the man who held Denzil's secret was concerned in it. But there was no time to consider the implications of that fact. He, Hilary, had got to answer, to tell something about that interview this evening. But, good heavens, that was just what he couldn't do! To gain time he exclaimed,

"How extraordinary! Yes, I remember hearing something about that Oxford burglary. But I really don't think the man I saw to-day can have anything to do with it. In any case he told me nothing that could throw any light upon it."

"Not directly, I dare say, sir. He would be careful not to. But it is information about the man himself that we want. He was known to you, I presume?"

"No, certainly not. He was a complete stranger to me."

"Yet you took him into the house with you, sir, and kept him here twenty minutes or so. Will you tell me why?"

"Well, chiefly because it was too cold to stand talking at the gate," replied Hilary. He knew that this reply was trivial and possibly irritating, but he had to make some answer.

The Inspector became a shade less suave. "It is the subject of your conversation that I am asking about, sir," he said, still quietly, but with an edge to his tone.

What on earth was he to tell the man? Was any part of the truth possible—omitting all reference to Denzil? No, of course not, and anyhow he dared not draw police attention to Jenner's death at all now. He made one more attempt to gain time.

"Look here, Inspector," he said, with some show of firmness, "I suppose I am not obliged to answer your questions, and before I tell you what the man wanted with me, I should like to hear rather more definitely what are your grounds for suspecting him. If he was not in Oxford at the time, what can he have to do with the burglary?"

Inspector Silver compressed his lips with a disappointed and slightly aggrieved air, but after a moment he said, "Well, sir, I'm prepared to oblige you, and I hope then that you'll see your way to doing as much for me. It's like this.

The man we are really after, Number One, let us call him, is a fairly well known American crook who came over here on the same boat as Mrs. Van Leer, and for his own purposes struck up an acquaintance on board with her maid. He followed them to Oxford, putting up at a small commercial hotel, and continued to court the maid and await his chance. This came when the lady left her hotel to pay a visit in a private house. The maid is not thought to have been a deliberate accomplice, but inadvertently to have given him a good deal of useful information about her mistress's movements and habits. Anyway, on the night of February 1st the burglary took place, and from that date Number One disappeared. But it was presently discovered that at his little hotel he had been much in the company of another man, who had arrived at about the same time as himself, and had also left on the day after the theft. Admittedly this man, Number Two, was not there on the night of the 1st. He spent it (we have verified the fact) at Burford in the Cotswolds. He returned to Oxford, however, in the course of the next day, enquired at the hotel for Number One, heard that he had left, and thereupon almost immediately left also.

"Well, as I said, on being traced and detained, he denied all knowledge of the affair or of the other man, Number One, beyond having made his acquaintance in the hotel. He claimed to have only recently landed in this country after a twenty years' absence in New South Wales. We have communicated with the police in Sydney, and also, I may say, in New York, for we have a strong suspicion that he may really have come from America on the same errand as Number One. While awaiting the result of these enquiries we are pursuing our own about this man's antecedents; meanwhile it suits our book to leave him at large,

while keeping him under observation. If he is really in league with Number One, he may lead us to him.—You see how frank I am being with you, sir! Now this Number Two is the man whom you have interviewed this evening, and as I am sure you can have no possible reason for shielding a very shady character, I hope you will now tell me equally frankly all about his business with you.”

Yes, the Inspector had been frank, which only made things rather worse for Hilary, because he still had no choice but to lie. And it was so hard to invent a plausible falsehood. Before attempting to do so, however, he determined to risk one further question. There was one that he *must* put, for in this narrative of the Inspector’s a place had been mentioned which seemed of vital significance. So he said, as coolly as possible:

“That’s all very interesting, Inspector. Of course I’ll tell you what I can, but will you tell me first, if you are at liberty to do so, whether you, or the Oxford police, ever established what this man Number Two went to Burford for on the first of February?”

And having risked this question Hilary waited with anxiety for the answer. For was not Burford a bare four miles from Charton, and February 1st the day of Jenner’s disappearance as well as of the jewel robbery in Oxford? Could the police possibly have any inkling of a connection between the two?

Apparently not, for the Inspector shook his head. “No, sir, we don’t know why he went to Burford, unless it was simply in order to create an alibi for himself. He had once or twice previously left Oxford on a hired motor-bicycle, and his own explanation of these outings was that he was just enjoying the English countryside after his long absence in Australia. But this seems a bit thin, especially with

regard to the last one—to Burford—when the weather was so bad—it was the time of that big snowstorm, which you probably remember, sir—that he had to go by train to Shipton, the station for Burford, and walk the rest of the way. He doesn't appear to have turned up at Burford till late in the evening, but there is no doubt that he was at an inn there when the burglary was taking place! Perhaps, sir, since you ask about it, you yourself know or can guess at some reason for his going to Burford. Is that so?"

"Oh, no, indeed," answered Hilary hastily—too hastily, he instantly feared. "I only thought it was an interesting point—an obvious gap in your investigations. But if you can't fill it, Inspector, I'm sure I can't. As I told you, I know nothing of the man."

"No, sir?" The Inspector's tone was just a trifle tart. "But then perhaps you will be so kind at any rate as to turn to the gap you *can* fill—this man's business with you here this evening?"

There was no further possibility of delay. Hilary plunged desperately.

"He had no real business with me at all; he was just begging—the usual sort of thing, 'out of work,' 'wife and children to support,' 'served in the war and incapacitated, but no pension.' That was why I brought him in. At first I thought he seemed a decent chap, and that if there really had been some hitch about his getting a pension to which he was entitled, I might be able to help him. I am in the War Office, as it happens."

Hilary paused, rather pleased with this inspiration, but he was a good deal taken aback when the Inspector responded instantly, "Yes, sir, Principal in one of the branches of the Finance Department, I think?"

"Quite so; you are well informed, Inspector!" Hilary

looked his inquisitor in the face. The situation touched him personally more nearly than he had thought. Scotland Yard had taken the trouble to ascertain his position. Did they suspect him in any way? That seemed very unlikely, but if it came out later that he had deliberately lied to the police—it might end in his ceasing to function in any branch of the Civil Service! Well, it couldn't be helped. Denzil's liberty, even his life, it now seemed, might be involved in what he said, or rather did not say. And as for the ethics of shielding Denzil, the fact that he had not intended any harm to Jenner surely justified this action.

"But having got the man in here," Hilary continued, "I soon found that he was a fraud. He couldn't tell me anything definite, no regiment or details of service, nor give me any straightforward account of himself at all. I came to the conclusion that he had probably never even been in the army—he could show me no papers—so it only remained to get rid of him; and of course, having been fool enough to let him into the house, I had a good deal of difficulty in inducing him to leave, and it took some time. That's all there was to our interview."

Would the Inspector swallow the specious vagueness of this thumping lie? He didn't look in the least satisfied.

"The man was with you for twenty-one minutes, sir! Can't you tell me *anything* he said, however unimportant? It might have some significance for me, though not for you."

"No, there was nothing to catch on to," said Hilary shortly.

"I suppose he gave you his name, sir?" tried the Inspector patiently.

Hilary hesitated. The man hadn't, of course, but surely

it would look too improbable if he said so, since in such an interview as he had reported that must have been his own first question. Better invent a name for him.

"He called himself Thomas Brown," he replied boldly. "I dare say it isn't his real name. Is it the one you know him by?"

"No, sir. To us and in Oxford he called himself Joe Webster. Does that name convey anything to you?" The Inspector shot the question at Hilary rather sharply, and it was slightly cheering to be able to meet it and his look without a tremor.

"It conveys nothing whatever to me," Hilary said coolly. "I know neither the one name nor the other. Probably they are both false?"

In his turn Hilary looked a question, but Inspector Silver only replied, "Maybe, sir," and then continued doggedly, "You made enquiries as to his war service, sir. Can you not tell me exactly what he replied?"

Hilary set his teeth. It was no good the Inspector going on like that. However suspicious his own persistent vagueness might appear, it seemed to him less dangerous on the whole than to commit himself to further definite lies. Besides, he really felt quite incapable of inventing answers for 'Thomas Brown.' So he said rather crossly, "I've told you already that I can't be more exact. It was plain that the man was a fraud, and I hardly listened to what he was saying. I was wondering how I was going to get rid of him."

"But you must have listened to his *first* answers, sir, until they had convinced you that he was a fraud!"

"He didn't give me any proper coherent answers—that *was* what convinced me," countered Hilary.

The Inspector gave every sign of retaining his patience

with difficulty, but he did retain it. "Did he definitely ask you for money, sir?" was his next question, and Hilary, thankful for one which he could answer truthfully, replied, "Certainly he did; it was all he was after."

"And did you give him anything, sir?"

"A trifle. That was the end of it; he grumbled but he went."

So saying, Hilary rose as though to intimate that he thought it was time Inspector Silver went also. But the latter, though he stood, up made no motion to go. His brows drawn together into a frown, he said slowly, "I'm a good deal puzzled by your account of the interview, sir. It doesn't tally with what I know about the man. He had his story all pat, and was not in the least incoherent when we questioned him. Also, though he may well be short of money, from what we know of his circumstances it seems improbable that he would be engaged in mere casual begging, and he's too sharp a fellow to try it on in the way you describe. Besides, it was not casual. The detective-constable who was watching him reports that he was outside this house for more than a quarter of an hour before you came. He was obviously waiting for you, sir. Now, why should he do that?"

"How should I know?" retorted Hilary curtly. Was there to be no end to this? "Perhaps your constable was mistaken in the time—or even in the man. Maybe my beggar was not your jewel thief after all?"

Surely that was rather a good suggestion? Unfortunately the Inspector would have none of it. "Quite impossible, sir! The detective-constable is a first-rate man; and he has been keeping an eye on Webster for some days. He tracked him here, and followed him afterwards to where he is known to be lodging. Webster came and waited here to

see *you*, sir, there is no doubt about that."

"Well, I'm sure I can't tell you why," responded Hilary with literal truthfulness, and added, on a sudden unguarded impulse, "Unless he too had found out somehow that I was in the War Office, and therefore thought I was a good person to apply to?"

"Oh no, pardon me, sir!" the Inspector took him up instantly. "That won't do! You say he could make out no claim at all to war service, therefore an official of the War Office would be the last person he would apply to for relief on that score!"

Hilary bit his lip. "It must have been just chance, then."

Again the Inspector shook his head. "I can't admit that. Everything points to his having come to you for some definite reason, and I wish, Mr. Severn, you could see your way to helping me to find out what that reason is!"

"Well, I've told you over and over again that I can't," said Hilary, now really roused. "If you stay here till midnight, Inspector, I shan't be able to tell you anything different."

Now at last the Inspector seemed to accept defeat. His face was grave. "So it appears, sir," he said heavily. "Well, I'm disappointed." He paused, then, looking Hilary squarely in the face said, "I'm afraid you've hardly been quite frank with me, sir; you could have told me more. It seems . . . a pity."

Hilary returned his look steadily enough, though he felt himself getting red.

"But I can't tell you what I don't know! And I don't know a thing about your jewel robbery, or this man's connection with it; nor do I know who the man is, and that's a fact."

The Inspector sighed. "Maybe, sir, but that's not the

point. However, I suppose it's no good going over all that again. You really have nothing more to tell me. . . ? No, well then——" as Hilary stubbornly shook his head, "I will say good night."

In silence Hilary saw him to the door.

Denzil, sitting by the fire, had a book in his hand which he laid down the moment Hilary came into the room.

"Your Mr. Silver, whoever he is, seems to have had the devil of a lot to say," he remarked. The next instant he sprang to his feet.

"Who was it?" he asked in a very different tone. "Not that blackmailing brute back again?"

Hilary shook his head, and said with a somewhat shaky little laugh, "Things are getting a bit hectic this evening. My Mr. Silver was a detective-inspector from Scotland Yard!"

"*What!*" For an instant Folyat stood rigid. Then he came and caught Hilary by the arm.

"After me, of course! Why didn't you—what have you done with him?"

"He wasn't after you in the least—he never mentioned you! It's the blackmailer he's after—the man who was here this evening. But it's not as a blackmailer that they want him. The fellow's mixed up in a jewel robbery at Oxford. No, I'm not mad—and I'm telling you the exact truth!"

Denzil's hand dropped from his arm. Hilary went and threw himself into a chair by the fire. He felt dead-beat.

His lips compressed, Denzil stared at him. "But what did the Inspector want with *you*? You've been the deuce of a long time with him!"

"I know. It damned well seemed like it," replied Hilary,

almost with a groan. "Can't you guess, Denzil? He wanted to know all about that man's interview with me. It appears that there was a detective outside, keeping watch on his movements all the time. But of course it was impossible to tell the inspector a word of what actually passed, so I had to invent some drivel or other, which naturally he didn't believe. However, he's gone, thank God!"

Denzil, standing over him, exclaimed angrily, "So you've been lying to the police on my account, and laying up trouble for yourself! I tell you I won't have it, Hilary! You should have told him the truth. And to think that I was here in the next room all the time! Why on earth didn't you fetch me?"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" snapped Hilary with equal heat. "And for heaven's sake sit down, and don't stand glowering there! . . . Or you can give me a whisky and soda if you like."

Denzil looked at him for a moment, then he fetched a tumbler without a word, and without a word Hilary took it and drank off its contents. "That's better," he said. "Now I'll tell you the really important thing, which is, what *I* got out of the Inspector."

But Denzil, who had sat down, said, speaking very quietly now: "You'll kindly tell me first what story you put him off with, because if I think it sounds at all fishy—for you—I shall tell Scotland Yard a different tale."

"And thereby *prove* me a liar! What good would that do me? Have some sense!" Then, realising the effect which the growing tension of the evening was having on him, Hilary made an effort to pull himself together.

"Sorry, old man!" he said, more soberly. "But really I think it's all right. Inspector Silver can only think, as he said, that I was not being quite frank with him. I

hadn't time to invent anything really plausible, so I made out that the man—Webster, he calls himself, apparently—claimed to be an old soldier in need, and without a pension, and that I brought him into the house to investigate this, and then, though I soon found out that he was a fraud, I couldn't get rid of him. But as I couldn't produce a single sentence of what he had said to me, and the Inspector was determined to elicit *something*, we have been at logger-heads most of the time."

"Yes, I can see that you have got yourself into a nice mess with the police . . . on my account!" said Denzil, frowning gloomily. "And what's going to happen to-morrow when the man—Webster, did you say?—comes for the rest of the money? (By the way, that five pounds is going to be my affair.) But you ought never to have told him to come again, Hilary! And now we must somehow stop him doing so. You would never be able to explain away a second visit."

Hilary looked rather taken aback. "We can't stop him; there's no means of doing so. And what's more I promised him there should be no police waiting for him; and now there probably will be—though not by my doing."

"No, he'll bring them with him—trailing clouds of glory, as it were. The only thing I can think of is that you should be out when he comes."

"But I can't stay out all night, and he may wait until I return, and so will the detective who's shadowing him. But perhaps this Webster will have found out before then that he is being followed, and won't come."

"Anyway, I shall be here to-morrow evening," announced Folyat firmly, "and if Inspector Silver pays another visit he'll have to do with me. It's intolerable that you——"

Hilary interrupted him. "Denzil, do drop that aspect of it now! We can't alter it anyhow. I want to tell you something extraordinary about the man himself."

"All right," said Folyat. "Fire away. You said something about a jewel robbery at Oxford."

Hilary thereupon told him exactly what he had learnt from the Inspector, finishing by saying, "But the point for us is that the jewel robbery took place on that fatal Wednesday, February 1st; and this man Webster has only escaped arrest for complicity in it because he established an alibi for that particular night. And where do you think he was? At Burford in the Cotswolds, and Burford is not more than four miles from Charton-under-Wold! Now what do you make of that when you couple it with his knowledge of your encounter with Jenner?"

Denzil was silent for quite a space, then he said slowly, "I see what you are driving at. But as I've told you over and over again, Hilary, no one could have witnessed that encounter. I'm *certain* there was nobody else in the lane when I was there."

"Well, you may be sure that nobody *passed*, but what if someone were already there, hidden?"

"My dear fellow, why on earth should anyone hide there on such a night, and where do you imagine they would hide?"

Hilary hesitated. "I admit that is a difficulty, for of course there was no bank or hedge of any kind at that spot."

"You're wrong there," said Denzil, "there was quite a bit of bank with a thickish hedge on top of it. Yes, he might have been behind that, I suppose, but . . . Good Lord, what's the matter?"

For Hilary had bounded out of his chair. "Not where

Jenner was found!" he almost shouted. "There's no bank or hedge *there!* Tell me, quickly, on which side of the lane, coming from the high road, did you knock him down?"

Denzil too had got up, more slowly, indeed a little like an automaton. His eyes were fixed on the excited Hilary; bewilderment seemed to fight in them with some other emotion.

"On the right hand," came his answer. And then he added with a little catch of the breath, "Why?"

"Idiots, *idiots* that we've been, both of us!" cried Hilary, almost beside himself with excitement. "Why, all this time, did neither of us . . . Denzill!"—he seized Folyat by the shoulders, "Jenner's body was found on the *left-hand* side of the lane, and nowhere near that bank with a hedge, which is farther back and on the right, as you say. He was lying in a snowdrift quite thirty yards higher up the lane, on the left, where there are open, unfenced fields above the ditch. You didn't kill him after all, you didn't kill him! . . . Denzil, say something!" And he almost shook him.

What little colour there was in Denzil's face had ebbed away. The first effort he made to obey this injunction was unsuccessful. He had to clear his throat before he could bring out the words: "Are you sure? You weren't there, were you, when he was found?"

"No, but I was shown the spot only a few hours afterwards—a whole bunch of villagers was standing round it. There is no possibility of mistake about the place. . . . Sit down again, old man; this has knocked you out a bit, hasn't it? But how is it you didn't realise this? Evidence was given at the inquest, and reported in the papers, as to where he was found."

Denzil was in the armchair again, gripping either arm

as though to assure himself of something solid. He stared up at Hilary with a slightly dazed expression.

"No paper that I saw mentioned the right or the left of the lane. Accounts merely said that he was found in a snowfilled ditch about three hundred yards up it. How could I doubt that it was at the place where I had pushed him over?—But if it wasn't, what do you suppose happened?"

"Well, we know now that Jenner must have got up and gone on . . ."

"Only to collapse a little farther up on the other side." Denzil shook his head. "No, Hilary, this doesn't really make very much difference. It was probably the shock I gave him which brought on that heart failure of which the doctor spoke. It may be at one remove, but I am still responsible for his death."

"I can't admit that for a moment," retorted Hilary stoutly. "You *must* see that this discovery has changed everything."

"No, it hasn't," replied Denzil dispiritedly. "Although Jenner did apparently pick himself up in between, it was *my* hand which pushed him into that ultimate ditch—his grave." He glanced at it an instant—a very shapely, sensitive hand. "'Not all the perfumes of Arabia,' you know, Hilary—"

"Yes, but you're not Lady Macbeth, even if you fancy the part," objected Hilary, still on fire with his discovery. "Someone else is playing her (or rather Macbeth) and trying to fix the guilt on you, as she did, or thought of doing, I seem to remember, in the case of those 'grooms.' Don't you remember the feeble pun about 'gild and guilt' which ends the scene? (I remember, because I 'did' the play at school.) Everything *is* changed, and I'm dashed well

going to show you that it is!"

"I'll try to be convinced," said Folyat, summoning up a rather weary smile. Then he looked at Hilary. "At any rate there's one *person* who isn't changed, thank God!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was when coming home in the Underground next evening that Hilary had his moment of illumination. He had started on his journey thinking how different the whole world looked—even Westminster Bridge Station invaded by a river fog—now that he felt sure that Denzil was guiltless of Jenner's death. Unfortunately, as he was only too well aware, he would never be able to get Denzil himself to taste the full measure of that relief until some person had been produced who *was* guilty.

Since Denzil was so certain that no one had been in the lane that night—or rather as Hilary more judicially put it in his own mind, was certain that he had *seen* no one—Hilary was forced to cling to the theory that the witness of that interview with Jenner had been there invisible—i.e. he was hidden. And it appeared conclusive that no one would have hidden himself in such a secluded spot in a snowstorm save for some nefarious purpose. And, thought Hilary, as at Victoria he gave up his seat to a lady, this brings one back inevitably to Mrs. Jenner's conviction of an enemy and the footsteps in the fog. If only one did not know that ex-P.C. Garlock was at that time thousands of miles away in Stotsville, Ohio, how simple it would be.

Was it possible that that dated letter from Stotsville was not as conclusive as it seemed to be in proving its writer's alibi at the crucial date? Was it possible? Let me suppose it to be possible then, said Hilary roundly to himself, just as the train came to a temporary resting place amid the

platforms of South Kensington. Let me boldly form a working hypothesis that the man Webster—witness and blackmailer—is Garlock . . . somehow . . . and see where we get to. Why, the case would be clear, for Garlock had a credible motive for lurking on Jenner's path even on a snowy night. Moreover, according to the owner of the Magnifico Stores, he had actually threatened—years ago, it was true—to get even with him.

By the time he alighted at Gloucester Road Station Hilary's working hypothesis had come to seem to him much more than that. It provided a really convincing solution of the mystery, and he walked home feeling that he could hardly wait for Denzil's arrival, in accordance with last night's arrangement, to impart his new conviction.

But to his surprise he found Folyat already in the drawing-room with Rosalind. They were standing talking, Rosalind with her outdoor things on; and almost instantly some intuition told Hilary that his sister had learnt from Denzil's own lips the fact that his engagement was at an end.

"I'm just going out, Hilary," she said rather hastily. "Unless you and Denzil particularly want to smoke in your den you'll find it warmer in here."

"But I am sufficiently out of date, Mrs. Fortescue," said Denzil with a smile, "to think that one should hesitate to smoke in a lady's drawing-room."

"That's very nice of you," responded Rosalind, "but Hilary isn't so old-fashioned, and I don't mind at all, so long as it isn't cigars."

"I think we'll stay then, and watch for Webster here," observed Hilary, shutting the door behind his sister. "Otherwise we should have to turn Quentin out of the dining-room—he's doing his prep. there—and he has too

enquiring a mind. I intend to let the man in myself," he explained.

"I suppose we must expect him to turn up," said Folyat regretfully. "I have not succeeded in stopping him—that is if he is X.Y.Z.—in spite of having found the address which that amiable gentleman gave me."

"You have done what!" exclaimed Hilary rather horrified. "Denzil, you ought not . . ."

"Why not? Since last night it looks, ironically enough, as if you might indeed be somewhat suspect in the eyes of the law, while I am not! In any case there is no reason why I should not pay a visit to the Tate Gallery and I was (let us assume) on my way there when I walked along Freeman Street, Pimlico. You remember the address, perhaps; it was Number 34, and as I expected, it proved to be only an accommodation one—a little tobacconist's shop, and no good at that because it was empty. From a small child gazing into a sweet-shop, a little farther on, I learnt that Mr. Smith had given up his shop, 'and me farver says as he's gone right awy from Lunnon.' Apparently this exodus had taken place within the last week. There was nothing more to be done there, and I went on—to the Tate. And, by the way, Hilary, I'd no idea the new Lambeth bridge was so imposing!"

"Is it? I don't think I've seen it yet; I haven't been along Millbank for ages," said Hilary rather absently. He went and took a look out of the window. "No sign of our man yet. I hope he doesn't come for a while, because I've something to discuss with you first. Let's sit down. . . . Now listen to me. I've had a brain wavel! What if my friend Webster—who is almost certainly your friend X.Y.Z.—is also Garlock? If he were, it would explain everything."

"It would," said Denzil lazily, leaning back and watching a ring of smoke, and as Hilary looked at him, surprised at this tepid reception of his great idea, he added, "The same possibility has suggested itself to me since last night."

"It has? Well, there you are! Only," said Hilary, wrinkling his forehead, "in that case how do you get over the plain evidence of the letter from Ohio to Miss Grimes at Winridge? *Is* there some flaw in that alibi which has escaped me?"

"Decidedly there is," said Denzil with a smile. "I saw it at the time, but the evidence appeared to satisfy you, so I let it go."

Hilary sat up. "You let it go! Why on earth did you do that?"

"Because, my dear chap, it suited my book then that you *should* be satisfied. I wasn't going to direct your attention to the weak point in your argument."

"Well, you can do it now," said Hilary ruefully, the amateur detective in him rather ruffled.

Denzil threw away his cigarette. "That letter would have nailed down Garlock to Stotsville, Ohio, all right if you could have proved that he *posted* it himself, but how do you know that he did?"

"What's this? You think he didn't?"

Denzil nodded. "I think that if Webster is Garlock he left it behind for someone else to post after he had sailed from America. Didn't that possibility ever occur to you?"

"Never!" said Hilary, rather crestfallen. "But now that you point it out it's obviously possible. Yet hang it all, Denzil, why *should* Garlock make such an arrangement?"

"Well, don't you think that an ex-prisoner already

known to the police, coming over here with another crook to acquire these jewels—to put his purpose at nothing more sinister than that—might make some effort to prepare an alibi for himself in case the police got on to his track? His only relative, Miss Grimes, all the better a witness if she herself was taken in, could trot out that letter to prove her nephew's continued presence in the States—as she did in your case. It looks as if, being an expoliceman himself, Garlock had no great opinion of the intelligence of the Force.”

“Thank you!” said Hilary, too pleased in reality at such support for his great idea to mind the reflection on his own intelligence. “I am certainly not intended by nature for a sleuth, but then I never took up the game from choice. If your theory is right it does remove a great difficulty.”

Denzil lit another cigarette. “Let's assume that something of the sort happened,” he said, “and that Garlock was in England at the beginning of February, or rather earlier. What then?”

“I can't help thinking that the letter which Jenner destroyed must have been from Garlock—though if it contained threats it does seem extraordinarily foolish of him to have written it to the man he intended doing in.”

“So foolish,” agreed Denzil, “seeing that he couldn't possibly have counted on its being destroyed, that it would be easier to assume that it was on the contrary a letter of warning from some other quarter.”

“Unless,” suggested Hilary, “he hadn't really intended to harm, only to frighten Jenner when he wrote it.”

“But, having written it, it would be almost insane to go on to murder afterwards, with that letter, for all he knew, in the hands of the police already. And remember the

precaution he took in Stotsville to hide his presence in England. No, I think the burnt letter wasn't from Garlock.—But, to go on, I suppose that those footsteps in the fog might be assigned to him?"

"Certainly," replied Hilary promptly. "We know that Webster-Garlock hired a motor-cycle in Oxford in order to enjoy country rides. (The Inspector himself thought that pretty thin.) One of those rides, I am positive, took him to Crutchley's Corner. (I assume that he had previously ascertained that Jenner was the postman at Charton.) He may have come on him that evening by chance, or he may have been looking for him. I only wonder that he did not seize the opportunity of the fog to kill the poor chap then and there, especially as he had a motor-bicycle to get away on."

"That he didn't," said Folyat, "seems to tell heavily against your theory that he is the guilty party."

But Hilary dismissed this objection by saying, "Oh, something must have stopped him—people within hearing, perhaps. Let's go on to the really important point. We *know* that he was within a few miles of Charton on the night of Jenner's death, February 1st, and he had no good reason to give the police for his presence there."

"His stay at Burford provided him with an alibi for the robbery, anyhow," Folyat pointed out. "Perhaps at the last he preferred to leave his accomplice to pull the chestnuts out of the fire."

"What, and risk losing his share of the haul?" exclaimed Hilary. "Besides, in that case, he would never have gone back to Oxford next day and enquired for him, a most risky proceeding, as he found, since it brought the police down on himself."

"Yes, I think you must be right there. But what next?"

Folyat still spoke quietly, but there was a hint of suppressed excitement in his voice. "Granted that the man was in the Cotswolds on the night of Jenner's death, how do you pin him down on that occasion to any place nearer Staneley than Burford?"

"By his exact knowledge of your doings in Crutchley's Lane that evening, of course! Now listen, Denzil, to this equation. Webster knows of these doings; X.Y.Z. knows of them; it is almost inconceivable that they are not one and the same man, and that man an eye-witness. And why was that eye-witness hidden in the lane, if he hadn't a very strong reason for being hidden there? Only one person, so far as we know, had such a reason, and that was Garlock. The three of them are only one individual—ex-P.C. Robert Garlock!"

"In spite of the faint flavour of the Athanasian Creed—if you'll forgive my profanity—about your conclusion," said Denzil with a grin, "it has an air of plausibility. It's a working hypothesis anyhow. Go on."

Hilary resumed with fervour. "I assume then that Garlock, as I shall now call Webster, lay in wait for Jenner, knowing, from his previous visit in the fog, the time he would pass after clearing the letter-box at the corner, and hid in or behind the hedge close to where you stopped Jenner.—You would admit, wouldn't you, that that would be a likely place for an ambush?"

"Yes, I admit that—about as far from the high road as he could get and yet find cover."

"Precisely. There he heard and saw what took place between you and Jenner. My contention is that the moment you had vanished he left his hiding-place and did what he had come to do. After pushing the poor fellow into the drift farther up, on the other side of the road, for

that was where the snow was thickest—remember I've seen the lane in snow—Garlock probably tried to get back to the railway station. (He had come by train this time, the Inspector said.) No doubt it was the snow which prevented his getting farther than Burford.—Some weeks later, after wriggling out of the clutches of the police, in connection with one crime, and feeling that the verdict of death by misadventure had disposed of any danger from the other, and being, probably, in low water through not having shared in the proceeds of the robbery, he thought he might venture to blackmail the man whom he had seen snatch a letter and knock the postman down just before his own attack on him."

"You're assuming a thundering good nerve on his part, to try blackmailing someone for a crime he had committed himself!"

"Well, you can't deny that few blackmailers can have had such a chance presented to them. . . . But what rather beats me is, how he discovered your identity. . . . By the way, though, why doesn't he come?" Hilary got up and went to the window, only to remark a moment later, "It's quite dark now, and Ormiston Place is not too well lighted. If Webster brings his detective-constable with him the latter won't be easy to spot."

"But he'll spot you easily enough in this lighted room," said Denzil sharply. "You'd really better draw the curtains and keep away from that window, Hilary. You don't want a detective to see you obviously watching for someone."

"That's true," said Hilary, drew the curtains and returned to his chair.

"As to Garlock's identifying me," said Denzil, "there is one possible way—the way which at the time I rather

feared the police might take, had my theft of the letter been reported by Jenner—and that is through Chloe's name and address, which Jenner read out aloud when he produced the letter. Garlock, if he was near enough, might well have heard him doing it. But Chloe has never been bothered in the matter. She would certainly have told me if she had."

"He's got on to you through Chloe all the same!" exclaimed Hilary excitedly. "I see it all now! He did overhear her address. He's the 'retainer,' of course!"

"What on earth do you mean? What retainer?"

Hilary explained. "We had already had the idea," he went on, "that the man whom Quentin reported as watching this house might be that soi-disant former gardener of General Page's, and when Webster-Garlock accosted me at the gate yesterday evening I even asked him if he were an old servant who wanted Miss Page. And what's more he grinned, though he said, 'No.' But I am sure that he knew very well what I was talking about. Now let's think how he could have got on to you at Lincott Manor, when he went there—for remember we *know* that an unknown man did go there and make enquiries."

Having said this, it suddenly struck Hilary that they were getting on to the rather delicate ground of the engagement which no longer existed. But Denzil took up the theme without visible embarrassment.

"Servants always gossip, luckily for him. I dare say he learnt quite easily that Miss Page was engaged, and the name of her fiancé and that he lived in London, where she had just gone on a visit."

"Yes, and then he would guess that by watching the house where Chloe was staying he would be pretty sure to get a sight of . . . the fiancé."

"Agreed, but why should he think that the fiancé would prove to be his man of the lane? I never said anything to poor Jenner to suggest that. . . . Still, I'll admit that it was likely that any man who went to the length of trying to suppress a letter addressed to her must have *some* close interest in her; and such a man, even if not the one who was engaged to her, might well be among those who called at the house where she was staying. And so he watched it on the chance."

"And chance favoured him, by Jove! I can tell you the very occasion. It was the evening when Quentin launched his idiotic theory about poison gas in the letter-box, and I followed you out to the car. We were, unfortunately, talking about Jenner, and, as I realised afterwards, there was a man loitering close by the Bentley. He would have heard what we said, and may have recognised your appearance."

"He can hardly have seen enough of me in the lane for that."

"But he must have heard your voice, if he heard Jenner's—which *ex hypothesi* he did—and there's your height and general build to go upon."

"Even if he recognised me it wouldn't tell him who I was," objected Denzil.

"But I probably addressed you by name, and though it would only have been your Christian name, still he might have been told that at Lincott Manor."

Denzil nodded. "Even if he had only learnt my surname there, and had thought to look it up in the telephone directory, where I am the only Denzil Folyat, then, after hearing you call me Denzil he would have spotted me all right, and got my address at the same time."

"Now tell me," said Hilary eagerly, "what day you got

your first blackmailing letter? Wasn't it quite soon after that evening?"

"I got the first one on the last day of February, which would be . . . last Tuesday fortnight."

"There you are! It all fits in! The talk by the car happened a fortnight ago last Monday, the day after I came back from Charton the second time. Having identified you, Garlock lost no time, but wrote his first blackmailing letter to you that same evening. We've got the whole thing complete!"

"Yes, in theory," agreed Folyat. "But that's not proof."

"Oh, nonsense, it's as good as proof! Anyway, when he comes, I shall open by addressing 'Webster' as Garlock, and see what happens."

"I don't think you will have that pleasure," said Denzil, glancing at his watch. "It doesn't look as though he were coming at all." He got out of his chair and went himself to the window. "I'm glad of it, for it's much too risky for you to have any more to do with him. . . . Hullo here's your sister coming in at the gate!" he observed, dropping the curtain and coming away. "I shall clear out now, and the best thing you can do is to tell your parlourmaid that if a man who pestered you to buy something yesterday comes back, she is to send him about his business, for you are not going to see him."

"But then we shall never get a chance of proving our theory. Besides, hang it all, I *promised* him the balance of that five pounds."

"Well, you'll have to break that promise—you ought never to have made it, anyhow. And he hasn't kept his side of the bargain—he's failed to come at the appointed time.—Yes, Mrs. Fortescue," he went on as the door opened on Rosalind, "you find me still here in body, but I am

spiritually on the doorstep, I assure you!"

When Hilary came back from seeing him out, he met Quentin just emerging from the dining-room with an armful of lesson books, which promptly slid from his grasp and scattered themselves over the hall floor.

"I'm very unlucky this evening, Uncle Hilary," he lamented, as he grovelled for them. "My prep. was perfectly beastly, and I couldn't get on with it, and I'm not playing in the match to-morrow, and I can't have Barclay major to tea because he's got mumps. Everything is horribly dull just now!"

Dull! And thinking of all that Quentin had missed (and was missing) and could never be told—not even that he had been coping with his homework in the very room in which last night an inspector of the C.I.D. had tried to get out of his unwilling uncle details of his previous interview with Jenner's probable murderer—Hilary felt something resembling remorse.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HALLO!" exclaimed Hilary next morning as his eye fell on a little item in the newspaper which he had just unfolded at the breakfast table.

"What is it?" asked his sister and nephew simultaneously, and Hilary bit his lip. Could he safely reveal to them the contents of that short paragraph? After a second or two's hesitation he decided that he could.

"It's only that Quentin's Oxford jewel robber has been arrested at last—charged and remanded," he replied. "Captured too, I suppose, without Barclay major's assistance."

So they had got Inspector Silver's "Crook Number One." Would the police now proceed to gather in "Webster-Garlock?" Perhaps they had already done so, and that was why he had never come last night. But there was no mention in *The Times* of any accomplice having been charged at the same time. Still, they knew where to put their hands on "Webster," and were bound to want to confront him with the other man, and, once in custody, what revelations might he not make about what he had witnessed in Crutchley's Lane, if he could invent some plausible reason for his own presence there? As soon as the dining-room was vacated Hilary rang up Denzil.

Folyat, who had not yet seen the paragraph, seemed to be in a somewhat devil-may-care mood. "I don't give the smallest damn if the weed Charlock is arrested and accuses me, for I shall counter by accusing him on the lines worked

out by Detective-Inspector Severn last night. I could get him a thumping sentence for blackmail, anyhow!"

"Possibly, if you hadn't destroyed his letters," said Hilary, dryly.

"Touché! I wish I hadn't now. Look here, I should like to get out of London this afternoon, or else take some violent exercise. It's Saturday—are you doing anything? Shall we drive together somewhere, or shall I betake myself to Bertrand's, or go and play squash at the Bath Club? . . . You'll drive with me? All right; come round and pick me up when you leave the Battle Shack, and we'll lunch somewhere first."

It certainly sounded as though Denzil had a weight off his mind, as of course he must have. And now, wouldn't the breach with Chloe be mended?

"I don't think Mr. Folyat has come in yet, sir—unless he's in his bedroom," said Dawson, opening the sitting-room door. "But I expect him any moment. He has ordered a lunch in here from Fortnum's."

Hilary went in and subsided into one of the big chairs. He had not only had a rather strenuous morning's work, but he was feeling the cumulative effect of at least a week of intense nervous strain and of numerous shocks; and so, though it was only a little after one p.m., his head went back after a moment and his eyes closed, almost without his knowing it.

He paid, however, only an extremely fleeting visit to the land of sleep, for when he opened his eyes with a guilty feeling he saw that the hand of the clock on the mantelshelf had only advanced two minutes. He lay lazily back without moving; and then, though he had not looked round, he became somehow conscious that he was no longer

alone in the room. Moving his recumbent head a fraction, he saw that Denzil was standing sideways at his writing-table in the window, looking down at something which he held. In that moment of Hilary's slumber he had presumably come in from his bedroom without noticing his sleeping visitor in the chair by the hearth, who was partly cut off from his view by the screen which shielded the bedroom door.

But he was not himself cut off from Hilary's eyes, and the latter was just going to say, "Hallo—did you see my disgraceful performance just now?" when Denzil did something which cut off the words before they had got to the late sleeper's lips. For he suddenly laid down the flat object which he held, dropped into a chair by the writing-table and buried his face on his arms.

Hilary wished himself a thousand miles away. It had come to him what the flat object was—the very charming photograph of Chloe Page which usually stood on that table. He knew what Denzil of all men would feel when he discovered that there had been a witness of his private grief—no matter who that witness might be. There was only one thing to be done; to pretend that the genuine slumber of a moment ago was still upon him; and to remain in this fictitious repose until Denzil discovered him. He shut his eyes tightly.

After a moment or two he heard the sound of a drawer being opened, then shut and locked; then of Denzil pushing back his chair and coming away from the writing-table. After that there were a few seconds of suspense until the silence was broken by Denzil's voice, distinctly surprised.

"Hallo! I didn't know you'd come! How long have you——"

Hilary opened his eyes, gave a realistic imitation of a jump, and assumed an owlish expression. "Good Lord!" he said, blinking up at him, "I must have fallen asleep. I didn't hear you come in. What an awful thing to do at this time of day!"

They drove down to Englefield Green after lunch, and leaving the car at Bishops Gate, set out to tramp across Windsor Great Park towards the Copper Horse. It had turned out a fine sunny afternoon with enough sting in the wind to show that it was only mid-March, yet with a haze in the distance which was not of winter's alchemy but of spring's.

"Now," said Denzil as they got into their stride, "I'll tell you the conclusion I have come to. I think that there is so much substance in your reconstruction of the crime that it is our duty to take the evidence about Garlock to the police."

Hilary suppressed a gasp. "But, good heavens, Denzil, we can't do that! The case against Garlock hangs on his knowing of your encounter with Jenner, and we should have to tell them about that."

"Well, obviously," agreed Denzil cheerfully. "And I am perfectly willing to do so. The discovery that Jenner's body was not lying where I left him does, I think, preclude any danger of my being charged with murder, or even, perhaps, with manslaughter—though I must risk the latter."

"Yes," said Hilary, "but what about the charge of felony—as you tell me stealing a letter is felony? You couldn't escape that!"

"I might conceivably, if by confessing it I brought a murderer to justice. In any case I think that is what I

ought to try to do; and for Jenner's sake you ought to want to help me."

To this unwelcome suggestion Hilary made no immediate reply. "Why can't the police find it out for themselves?" he demanded irritably. "They have only to take Webster's finger-prints to discover that he is Garlock—they must have Garlock's as he is an ex-convict. Perhaps they have identified him already. They know—at least I suppose it's on record somewhere—that at his conviction he expressed an intention of taking his revenge on Jenner. At any rate they know he had cause to hate him . . . and he was in the Cotswolds on the night of Jenner's death. Why can't they put two and two together, in spite of the verdict at the inquest?"

"Perhaps they are laboriously doing so, in which process we could be of the greatest assistance."

"But think of the possible cost to yourself! You're so frightfully impulsive, Denzil!"

"Even for my own sake I believe it would be better to go to them," went on Denzil, disregarding this charge. "If Garlock really gets into the hands of the police he'll probably inform about me—he certainly will if he finds that they are toying with any theory of murder. It is far better that I should go to Scotland Yard of my own free will, and tell my tale. It is also most desirable for you to explain without delay why you hesitated to be 'frank' with Inspector Silver. You may have to come out with the truth whether you want to or no. Suppose Garlock were brought to trial for complicity in the jewel robbery—you might be subpoenaed to give evidence about your interview with him, and you couldn't lie on oath!"

"Oh Lord!" groaned Hilary. "Let's drop it for the present! I can't walk at the pace you're going and weigh

anything so momentous at the same time!"

"All right," said Denzil. "Then let us consider how Milburn is to be dealt with, when he has got over that spill of his."

"Damn Milburn!" said Hilary. "He won't move, though."

"No, but I'm hanged if I won't!" said Denzil with decision. "Why shouldn't I bring the law of libel to his notice? I am willing to admit that I went to Staneley Court that afternoon in order to see him, but that gives him no right to charge me with murder, even in a round-about manner, and he's going to have that rubbed in. I shall threaten legal proceedings unless he retracts and makes a full apology. It's bluff, of course, but I don't think he'll call it."

"No, I don't suppose he would call it," agreed Hilary, reflecting that Milburn would be nearly as anxious as Denzil not to have Chloe's name brought into any possible libel case. He said no more, neither did Denzil, and they walked on in silence. To Hilary it seemed as if Chloe's image accompanied them; and possibly Folyat felt the same. At last they came to a halt before the mound which bears the third George, in wreath and toga, astride his stout steed.

Denzil turned and gazed down the vista of the Long Walk to the Castle in the distance. "If I thought that my losing her was the result of Milburn's machinations," he said suddenly—and his use of the pronoun showed that they had had the same invisible companion—"I would go and wring his neck, and cheerfully pay the penalty for it. But I know that it isn't so . . . fortunately for the prospect of having to make good my threat," he added with a wry smile. And then, in a tone which Hilary had never

heard from him in all the years he had known him, "I have lost her because I never really won her."

There was a longish silence, uncomfortable on Hilary's part. He was startled too. Was it possible that Rosalind was right, that the two were fundamentally unsuited to each other and that Denzil now recognised the fact? Gazing at the leafless elms of the avenue, he said at last, "But with this trouble on your mind almost from the first moment of your engagement, you really haven't had a fair chance."

"And whose fault was that?" enquired Folyat. "—Shall we go on?"

The two certainly got some exercise that afternoon, for after that Denzil hardly paused in the course of a tramp which took them by way of Smith's Lawn and another equestrian statute to Virginia Water, and back by the Rhododendron Walk. Hilary, who, with some guile, had advanced his partially simulated nap before lunch as a proof that he needed exercise, was not altogether sorry when they at last took their seats in the Bentley.

However, it was still much too early to dine when they got back to St. James's Street, so, leaving the car at the door, they went up to the flat.

Scarcely had the door swung open to its owner's key, when Dawson, evidently on the look out for their return, was in front of them.

"There's a person waiting to see you, sir, in the sitting-room, 'om I should not 'ave admitted if he had not said that he'd come from Mr. Severn. But I've left the door open, sir, and I've been keeping an eye on him all the time."

"All right, Dawson. Thank you." But when Dawson

had taken himself off the two looked at each other and then at the half-open door.

"Come from me! What does that mean?" queried Hilary under his breath. "Can it be the Inspector? Let me have a look." And he went to the threshold of the sitting-room.

A man in a belted Burberry, his hands behind him, was standing staring up at the beautiful little ivory Kwannon on the opposite wall. Hilary had only a momentary glimpse of him, but it was enough. He withdrew again.

"It's not Silver," he whispered. "It's my man—Webster."

"My man X.Y.Z.," responded Folyat quickly. "It's for me to tackle him."

"As Garlock?"

"No, not to begin with. Let him show his hand first."

As he moved towards the door Hilary caught his arm. "One moment! Is he still 'under observation,' I wonder. If so . . ."

"We can't do anything about it either way," retorted Denzil. "And in fact I should rather welcome a police interview now. Come on!" And on those words he went in, Hilary following and shutting the door.

The visitor faced round quickly. Without the jaunty little moustache—for Hilary now saw that it had gone—his face looked strangely denuded. It was not too well shaved however. And the illumination here, more widely distributed than in Hilary's little den, showed up without mercy the filthy Burberry, frayed trouser-bottoms, and cracked boots.

Folyat looked at him with distaste. "Well, what do you want with me?" he demanded. "And why did you say that you had come from Mr. Severn?"

A grin stretched Webster's bared lips for a second. "Only to be sure of getting in," he responded coolly. "Oh, you're

here too, Mr. Severn! That's lucky; you can give me the balance of what you owe me. It didn't suit me to come to your place for it last night."

"I asked you why you were here in my room; will you kindly answer me?" said Folyat sternly.

The man took a good look at him. "Well, certainly not for the pleasure of seeing you," he answered insolently, "because I've had that already—outside Mr. Severn's—nor of having that fat flunkey of yours popping in and out to make sure I hadn't mopped up any of your little knick-knacks, like that cock-eyed Virgin Mary there," he indicated the Chinese goddess of mercy. "I want to get out of this blasted country at once, and I haven't got the money to do it. You fork out fifty quid, Mr. Denzil Folyat, and I'll be off to-morrow and there'll be no more danger of what I know about you coming out. Mr. Severn here will have told you what that is."

"A marked reduction, Mr. X.Y.Z.," commented Folyat meaningly. "Last time your price was five hundred. I should have thought you must have realised by now that it is entire waste of time to try blackmail on me."

The visitor's eyebrows went up—too far. "Last time? Hell, what d'you mean? Has some other guy got hold of the story and been trying to touch you?"

"No, only you, Mr. X.Y.Z.—or to be less alphabetical, Mr. Webster."

Hilary, watching, was quite sure that the bearer of that cognomen was taken aback for an instant. He shifted a little on his feet and retorted, "See here, that's not my name!"

"I know it isn't. But it's the name you used at Oxford in January, and at Burford on the first of February." And, after waiting a moment to observe the effect of this ampli-

fication, Folyat added, "I know your real name too."

At that the wearer of the Burberry turned on Hilary with an oath. "You've been talking to the police, you——! You've done the dirty on me after all your fine promises!"

"I have not," retorted Hilary sharply. "The police were after you already—but they got no help from me."

"And if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head you'll be thrown out," said Denzil quietly. "—In fact you might as well go now, for you'll not get a penny from me."

The man drew a hissing breath. "So much the worse for you then, Mr. Denzil Folyat—Mr. Damned Fool! I'm off to Scotland Yard, and that inquest verdict won't save you any longer!"

"You've threatened that before," returned Denzil indifferently. "Get out and go there then. I'll ring up the Yard now, if you like. I've been on the point of going there myself since I came into possession of certain information about you, Mr. . . . *Garlock!*"

This time there was no doubt about the shock he had administered. The man in the Burberry took a couple of steps backwards; his fists clenched themselves, then one went up to hide his mouth. But the momentary fear in his eyes could not be hidden, although next instant he had called up a brazen stare and a tone to match it.

"Cripes! You are a oner for calling folk out of their names! Who's this Garlock, I'd like to know? Come off it now, Mr. Folyat, and get down to business! Give me that fifty quid and you'll hear no more of me. Do you expect to kid me into believing that you're ready to tell the police how you pushed poor old Jenner into a snow-drift in order to get hold of that letter to your young lady!"

"I am perfectly ready to tell them, as Mr. Severn can bear witness . . . now that I know who killed him, having followed him in the fog a few days before. . . . You see I know a good deal," went on Denzil, watching him narrowly. "I know, for instance, how you wrote a letter from Stotsville in Ohio, had it posted after you left America, and got your old aunt at Winridge to bring it out as evidence for . . ."

"Stop there!" cried their visitor, smacking one fist into the other palm. "Stop right there, Mr. Letter Thief! That's a dirty lie! My poor old aunt is as innocent as a baby . . ."

Denzil's laugh, brief but triumphant, cut him short in his turn. "*My poor old aunt!*" Thank you, Mr. Garlock, you have identified yourself very prettily! Most certainly I shall now communicate with Scotland Yard."

For a moment Hilary thought that the man was going to throw himself on Denzil, and took a step forward, but Garlock thrust his clenched hands into the pockets of the Burberry and broke instead into a volley of transatlantic bad language. Elated though he was by this dramatic confirmation of his guesses, Hilary almost felt that it was hard lines on the criminal before him to have been betrayed by his feeling for that little old woman in Winridge—possibly the only soft spot he had left, and he found himself saying, "Yes, but you know, Folyat, I am quite sure that Miss Grimes knew nothing whatever of that trick about the letter. She at least acted in good faith."

The stream of vituperation stopped; Garlock looked at him. "You're a gentleman, at any rate, Mr. Severn; I'll say that for you! So what about the balance of that five quid?" he went on quickly. "Because it was a promise,

now, honest to God it was . . . and I haven't got a cent in the world."

Hesitating a second, Hilary put his hand into his pocket. But he felt Denzil's touch on his arm. "That's childish, Hilary!" His voice was cold. "It was blackmail . . . and is my affair, not yours." And as Hilary still did not withdraw his hand he added in even more icy tones: "How you can bring yourself to give money to Jenner's murderer I can't imagine!"

At that moment, as Hilary's hand came out of his pocket, empty, the telephone bell rang. For a few seconds they all three stood looking at each other while it continued its double trill unregarded; then Denzil with an exclamation of impatience went over to the writing-table in the window.

Hilary was left facing the man—self-identified now as Garlock—who—they had every reason to believe—had murdered Jenner for a twenty-year-old grudge and tried to fix the guilt of his deed upon Denzil. In his presence Hilary should have been on fire with horror and indignation—and so he was—but he was conscious of some other unidentifiable strand of feeling in his mind as he gazed at Jenner's assassin. Was it pity, or was it loathing for that lost soul with the defiant eyes, glancing so desperately from him to Denzil and back again. He suddenly felt that he could not bear to look at him any more, and turned away.

"No, this is not the Carlton Cinema!" Denzil said curtly, and even as Hilary heard the words there came a succession of very rapid events—a rush, a click, utter darkness, and the sound of the door being plucked open and shut again.

The telephone receiver clattered on to the table. "Stop him!" shouted Folyat "—he's doing a bunk!" He as well as

Hilary darted towards the door and the electric light switch. The consequence for Hilary was a collision first with a chair and then with Denzil, and by the time the two had disentangled themselves, and Denzil had found and turned on the switch, the bang of the front door notified them that the quarry—if he were a quarry—was out of the flat.

Denzil obviously considered him a quarry. "Get out of the way, Hilary—we may still catch him if we are quick!"

But Hilary seized him by both arms. "No, no—for Heaven's sake let him go! We have no earthly right to detain him. We don't know for certain . . ."

"Damn it, we *do*!" snapped Denzil, wrenching himself away. "The telephone then—what's the number—Whitehall one two one two . . ."

"Wait, wait a moment!" cried Hilary. "We may regret . . . and here's Dawson!"

Denzil was checked, and appeared to change his mind. "Come in, Dawson, it's all right," he said. "Yes, he's hooked it, but there's no damage done, and nothing gone, as far as I know."

Dawson's face was a study. Looking round the room he perceived the overturned chair, and with pursed lips and disapproving mien he put it carefully on its legs again.

"Will you be dining in or out, sir?" he enquired.

"In, if you've got anything for us. Don't you think so, Hilary?"

By the time dinner was ready they were both spent with argument. The situation had undergone a change since they had discussed it a few hours ago in Windsor Park. Now, knowing that Webster *was* Garlock, they both felt practically certain that Jenner's death lay at his door. And even Hilary was before long forced to admit that

it was their plain duty to inform the police of their knowledge and their suspicions. But, still fearing the consequences for his friend, he pleaded hard, though not very logically, for a measure of delay. Why not wait until Scotland Yard had roped in Garlock for themselves on the robbery charge? But Denzil contended that it looked, judging by his visit this evening, as if for lack of evidence they were not going to arrest him, and had probably dropped shadowing him now that they had secured "Number One."

"On the other hand," said Hilary, "he may have given his 'shadower' the slip, and Scotland Yard may be wildly hunting for him."

"All the more reason why we should come to their assistance," retorted Denzil. "Your policy of procrastination, my dear fellow, hasn't a leg to stand on! And for how long do you propose to leave Jenner's murderer at large?"

To this Hilary could find nothing to reply, and at that moment Dawson announced dinner. As they got up from their chairs—Dawson had disappeared again—Denzil said firmly:

"I'm sorry, Hilary, but I shall go round to Scotland Yard as soon as we have had dinner."

"Very well," said Hilary resignedly. "I shall come with you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

To Hilary at least, after that announcement of Denzil's, dinner was hardly a cheerful repast, though his companion, dismissing the late subject of discussion, talked with equanimity of this and that. Not that Hilary really listened much; he could not help feeling, though no doubt foolishly, that this meal was like a condemned man's last breakfast. They had just reached the dessert stage, and Folyat was expressing his views on the political situation in France, when the telephone bell rang again.

"Another wrong number, I expect," he said, as he rose and took the receiver from the extension. "They rarely come as single spies . . . Hallo! Yes, this is Mr. Folyat's flat. Mr. Folyat speaking. What is it you want? . . . Mr. Severn? Yes, he's here. Who is it? . . . Who is it?"

There was apparently no answer, for Denzil turned to Hilary and said, "This is pretty startling! It sounds to me like our late visitor. But it is you he is demanding."

"What on earth . . ."

"I expect it's that money. Now, Hilary, don't be weak! And try and find out where he is."

Rather reluctantly Hilary took the receiver. A hoarse voice began almost immediately, "Is that Mr. Severn?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"*You* know," replied the voice and went on hurriedly; "I haven't much time . . . the cops are waiting for me I've just heard, at a place where I thought I was safe . . . and you two gentlemen know too much. So I'm going to move on somewhere where nobody can get me. But I want a

word with you first, Mr. Severn. You're not like that pal of yours—you'd have paid me my money, and you stood up for my poor old aunt . . . though it's you I suppose that I've got to thank for ferreting out things about me from her. But I don't bear you a grudge . . . I'm through with things now. . . . But just tell me, sir, how you found the old lady—did she seem well, and in decent circumstances?"

"Yes, oh yes—quite, I think," stammered Hilary completely taken aback.

"She's got her savings," went on the rasping and slightly breathless voice, "but you never know. . . . If I'd only got my share in those bloody diamonds I'd have been able to do something for her. Look here, Mr. Severn—and this is what I've rung you up for with my last tuppence—if you'll give me your word that she shan't ever come to real want, I'll tell you what I suppose you want to know. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes," said the bewildered Hilary. "I don't understand what you're driving at, but as for what you ask, yes, I could promise that."

In front of him was Denzil, frowning and saying under his breath, "Now don't you promise him money!" Hilary shook his head and waved him aside; and the receiver still at his ear, sat down to the small table on which the telephone stood.

The voice was going on. "And you won't let her know what I'm going to tell you?"

"Not if I can possibly help it."

"About David Jenner, then. I guess you didn't *know* anything really, but you came mighty near the truth. I'll be just as glad to get it off my chest."

"But you're not going to tell me over the telephone, surely!" protested Hilary. "It's risky!"

There was a laugh. "If it's risky for you to be heard talking to me, you'll have to put up with it. There's not much risk for me if I'm quick about it. Are you listening? . . . It's wrong to say that I came over to do Jenner in; I came over for another purpose . . . you know what. But I hadn't forgotten how he gave me away over that pocket-book. So I found out that he was alive still, and where he lived and what he was doing; and I nearly wrote him a nasty letter telling him his number was up, just to scare him."

"*Nearly?*" Hilary interrupted. "Are you sure you didn't? He got a letter that bothered him; I know that for a fact."

"He *did* get it?" The voice burst into profanity against some person whose name Hilary could not catch.

"Stop that!" he said sharply. "Why did you write it then?"

"I didn't. It would have spoilt my alibi at Stotsville. It was a bloke I met in London when first I came over. I was a bit canned and I told him the whole story of that bloody pocket-book, and how I wanted to put the wind up Jenner but didn't dare. Afterwards we had a quarrel, and what does he do but write a threatening letter himself, as if it came from me, just to try and get me into trouble. I only found this out last week. But I thought that perhaps Jenner'd never got the letter, as there was nothing in the papers about it at the inquest."

"No, unfortunately, because he had burnt it without anyone seeing it," said Hilary.

There was a grunt. "That was a bit of luck! But it don't make any odds now—where was I? Ah, about the job I came over on. Well, the party we were after took it into her head to go to Oxford, and we followed her of

course. I had time on my hands there, waiting for a good chance, so I thought I'd run down to this Charton place on a motor-bike and try to have a look at Jenner. The day I went it came on a fog; I saw him collecting at a letter-box, but he didn't see me. And I thought I could safely give him a bit of a fright, following him up that lane, and I did. And it struck me then, that if only there'd been a river or a pond handy, that he might seem to have fallen into of himself in the fog, I might have risked bumping him off that evening. It all came back to me so when I saw him again—that business at Winridge and the Assizes, and what happened to me afterwards. And there was he, so smug and respectable, and what had I become, and all because he couldn't hold his tongue! But I daren't do it that night; there was no way of getting rid of the body that I could see, so I just went back to Oxford."

For one moment the voice ceased, and Hilary, partly disturbed by Denzil's somewhat monitory aspect, and partly in pity for his obvious mystification, reached out for the telephone message pad, scrawled on it, "He's confessing," and pushed it towards him as the voice began again.

"Then about five days later came that snow. It fell a bit in Oxford, and I thought, if only it goes on, snow's a damn sight better than fog, and I knew now just what time he'd be likely to go along that lane, and it seemed a lonely one. I went by train this time, and had a job to get to the place too, Staneley being further from the railway than Charton, but I did it, and found a nice bit of hedge; and I climbed up behind and waited. The snow was falling all the time. It got darker, and I thought I'd missed him. Then at last I saw him coming slowly along with his bag. He'd just about got abreast of me when your fine friend came sprinting after him. Of course I didn't move then. And so

I saw what happened—you know all about it! For a moment I thought Mr. Folyat had done my job for me, but Jenner soon picked himself up, swearing, and then when he saw there was no sign of the gentleman, and he'd brushed the snow off himself, he started to go on up the lane. Then I scrambled down and went after him quietly; he didn't hear me coming because of the snow; and so I was able to jump . . ."

"That's enough!" said Hilary quickly into the telephone; "I don't want to hear this."

"Oh, there's nothing much to take on about, Mr. Severn," said the voice almost deprecatingly. "He went out easy. I expected more of a scrap. But the moment I got him down he went limp. Heart, I suppose, like they said at the inquest. I pushed him down into the snow—it was thick there. He never moved again; I stayed some time to make sure. . . . Are you still there, sir? In about ten minutes he was covered, and I saw that if it went on snowing all night, by morning he'd be buried, and perhaps not found till the thaw. In fact I'd my work cut out to get away myself, the station being so far. I remembered having seen in Oxford something about buses to Burford, and Burford was nearer. It took me a long time, but I got there, to find the buses had stopped running, so I had to stay the night there. And that was the beginning of all my bad luck, because when I got back to Oxford I found I'd just missed the bus in another sense—with the job I was there to help in, and so I never got a penny out of it. Many a time since I've wished I hadn't left Oxford that day."

"My God, if only you hadn't!" broke in Hilary. "But I can't see *why* you're telling me all this—and on the tele——"

"Because I thought, sir, you'd like to know the truth, and that David Jenner didn't struggle nor suffer when I got even with him—I don't know that he knew exactly what was happening. I'll admit that I was a bit sorry for that at the time, but I'm glad now, in spite of the fact that it was him that was responsible for everything, even for me being——"

"How *can* you say that, you scoundrell!" exclaimed Hilary.

"All right, Mr. Severn, all right, no need to get excited! There's a party wants this telephone box, and anyhow I've finished. Good-bye, and remember your promise! It's high time I started. If you want news of my arrival, keep a look out in the papers to-morrow. So long!"

"Started—where are you going?"

"Into the river!" came the reply, and on its heels a laugh and the click of the replaced receiver.

For a second or two Hilary sat petrified. Then he sprang up.

"Denzil, we must stop him somehow. He's going to throw himself into the river!"

"How do you know?" asked Folyat coolly.

"He's just told me so!"

"And you believe him? *O sancta simplicitas!* Even if he were, it's the best place for him—you can't deny that!"

"Yes, perhaps it is—but, Denzil, he's a human being after all, although he. . . . Look here, we must warn the police! What's the number of——"

Denzil laid a hand on his arm. "Warn them of what—and where? That a man's threatened to jump into the Thames—somewhere. Did he name the spot he'd selected?"

"No, but——"

"Do you know where he was telephoning from?"

"No. It was apparently a public call box. But he means to do it now—at once. He sounded quite determined; he told me to look for news of him in the papers to-morrow."

"Well, we will do so. Shall we have coffee here or in the other room?"

"Denzil, don't be so inhuman! I know the wretched creature's given you the hell of a time with those blackmailing letters of his, but that's over now——"

"His being a murderer isn't 'over.' What about Jenner, and Mrs. Jenner—and your own feelings?"

"All the same one ought to try to stop him!"

"To save him for the gallows! I've no particular objection to that, it's true. What do you propose that we should do?"

"Take your car—it's outside—and go down to the Embankment!"

Denzil looked at him a moment with a curious expression. Hilary thought he was going to refuse point-blank, and had a swift, uncomfortable vision of himself in a taxi futilely ordering a sarcastic driver to career up and down by the Thames till he found a suicide.

But Denzil was not refusing. He had swung round and was already opening the door of the room.

"You're a damned good fellow, Hilary! Come on then and we'll see what we can do."

They were sliding along by the Horse Guards when Hilary finished his outline of the confession which he had just received.

"And you were right, Denzil, you see, in your conviction about that letter to Jenner. Garlock didn't send it!"

"About the only point I was right over. And yet, in

our recent interview with the gentleman, you notice that I stole your thunder—presented your deductions as if they were my own!”

“I hadn’t patented them,” said Hilary. They were through Storey’s Gate now. “Which way shall we take along the river—right or left?”

“Not much to guide us, is there? It’s almost a case for tossing up.”

“More people, always, on the Victoria Embankment,” suggested Hilary. “To deter a suicide, I mean. Millbank is much more deserted.”

“Yes. Besides, the man had some connection with Pimlico, perhaps a haunt there. You remember the tobacconist’s in Freeman Street? Millbank it shall be!”

Round Parliament Square they went, slowed up perforce by the stream of traffic, past the Houses of Parliament, the deep throat of Big Ben intoning the quarter after them, and down the length of Abingdon Street.

“Your chance at last of seeing the new Lambeth Bridge,” remarked Folyat somewhat inconsequently; and soon, across Victoria Tower Gardens, they saw its lights and nearer spans.

The gardens came to an end; the car reached the actual riverside, and, almost immediately, the grassed roundabout at the sweeping approach to the bridge.

They were in the middle of the approach itself when Hilary gave an exclamation.

“What’s that crowd there!”

For by the further parapet of the bridge, round the first of the stepped embrasures from which rise the short concrete columns with their twin lights, a knot of men clustered like bees, clambering, shouting and gesticulating, though some, detaching themselves, were beginning to run

off the bridge and along Millbank as if towards some other goal.

"I believe we're too late," said Denzil gravely.

"No, else why are people running this way! Go on—go on!"

But once at the further pavement Denzil pulled up sharply. "Better find out something if you can."

Hilary hurled himself out of the car and caught hold of a shabby youth hurrying past.

"What's happened?"

"Bloke was throwing himself off of the bridge, and another bloke tried to stop 'im and spoilt his take off like, and the first bloke 'it 'is 'ead against sommat as he went over . . ."

"Do you mean he's . . ."

"Dunno, guv'nor. The river police 'as him now—looks like they're bringing him ashore at them steps over there." And as Hilary loosed him he ran on.

Hilary stood a second or two while other figures scurried by. Here one could not see much of the river, for a narrow enclosed tongue of garden intervened. Presumably the steps were at the further end. He got into the car again.

"I heard," said Denzil, letting in the clutch. "We must go and make sure. But I won't stop exactly at the steps: we don't want to draw attention to ourselves."

A moment later they had shot past the freshly formed gathering of spectators at the head of the invisible steps. ("They're like vultures," thought Hilary, "but are *we* much better?") . . . "If you'll stop a bit further on, Denzil, or up a side street, I will go back on foot, casually, as if I just happened to be walking that way."

"You will not go in any manner within reach of any

kind of police, river or otherwise," retorted Denzil firmly. "Particularly if the suicide is Garlock. I shall go. And if you don't agree to that——" he began to accelerate slightly, "I shall not stop at all, and we may never know who it is."

Hilary knew that he was quite capable of carrying out this threat. "All right," he said dully. "Have it your own way." And his assent was not unmixed with a rather shamefaced relief at being spared a distasteful task.

"This is far enough, I think," pronounced Folyat in a moment. "More natural to stop here than up a side street. I shan't be long."

He got out and walked steadily back in the direction of the group at the steps. After a few seconds Hilary got out too. Above the chain of lights on the further bank somebody's port and sherry announced themselves in blood across the river which might claim to have avenged the Cotswold snowdrift. A tug hooted twice, with the very voice of melancholy. Hilary went nearer and looked over the parapet. The tide was nearing flood; patterned upon with gold and crimson, it moved restlessly, oily gleams showing between the unceasing ripple of reflections. At last he turned his head in the direction of the still invisible steps.

Yes, there was the shape of some kind of a boat approaching them, and the chug-chug of its engine. There was not another soul in sight along the Embankment; all had gathered to watch the bringing ashore of the latest Thames harvest. Hilary waited.

He had no idea how long it was before he saw the tall figure coming back. Folyat came up to him and nodded. He looked rather white.

"Yes, it's our man all right. He's dead too. Get into the car. We'll go round by Chelsea."

To the sound of another series of blasts from the receding tug they drove away.

"Your informant was correct," said Denzil after a moment in a somewhat subdued voice. "Garlock wasn't drowned. He had hit his head in going over—on one of those big projecting pontoons, I suppose. It was pretty badly smashed. I got a good sight of him—had to. It wouldn't have happened so, of course, if he had not been prevented from jumping clear—shows what harm may come of well meant interference. If the other fellow hadn't tried to stop him—grabbed him by the legs perhaps—the police boat, as it seems to have been handy, might have picked him up alive . . . But if we want to be quite honest, Hilary . . ."

"Yes, I know," said Hilary.

And after that they drove on in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"IF you please, m'm," said Hester next morning, which was Sunday, "Mr. Hilary's not coming down to breakfast, if you'll excuse him."

"He's not ill, I hope?" asked Mrs. Fortescue.

"No, m'm. At least when I asked him if he would have some breakfast sent up, he said yes, and I've got the tray here."

"How jolly to be able to have breakfast in bed whenever you like," commented Quentin enviously. "I can't think why Uncle Hilary doesn't do it every morning."

"Because he has to get up and go to work, as you'll have to do some day, my son," replied Rosalind, putting bacon and sausage on a plate.

"Well, I do it now," retorted Quentin, with a certain amount of truth. "But when I'm in the C.I.D., at least, when I'm high up in the C.I.D., I shall do most of my detecting at night, so as to be able to have breakfast in bed. I shall go over my cases while I'm having it. I suppose Uncle Hilary is staying in bed because he was so late last night. Mr. Folyat brought him back."

"How do you know?"

"Because I woke up and heard the Bentley," replied the boy somewhat scornfully. "So I jumped out of bed and looked out, and saw Mr. Folyat coming up to the door with Uncle Hilary. But my watch had stopped—it's not really a very good watch, Mother—but it was somewhere in the middle of the night I'm sure. Perhaps they had been to a night club—Mother, what exactly *is* a night club?"

Upstairs in his bed Uncle Hilary, as it happened, *was* going over his "case." It was all ended at last, and better ended than, at one time, had seemed possible. Denzil and Chloe were parted, it was true, but there was no shadow of guilt over Folyat now, and one might fairly hope that no one in the world save Hilary himself knew that it had ever rested on him. Tired but contented, he knocked the ash off his cigarette into the saucer of his coffee cup. Never again, he hoped, need he go sleuthing.

But at least it was a consolation to know that he had not done Denzil any harm by it—on the contrary, as Denzil had pointed out last night when they got back to his flat, if Hilary had not come into the affair he, Denzil, even if he had never been accused of the crime, would have gone on all his life believing that he had been the cause of Jenner's death. Indeed he had expressed a degree of gratitude for Hilary's help which Hilary himself considered quite excessive.

It was certainly true that Denzil had been fortunate at the end, for the death of Jenner's real murderer had relieved him of any necessity for going to Scotland Yard and telling his story. He would still go abroad for a while, though not until he was satisfied that Hilary would be subjected to no further attentions from Inspector Silver or his colleagues. Of that they could not be sure until after the inquest on the suicide, who might or might not be identified as Garlock. In any case Hilary hoped that Miss Grimes would not learn of his end.

And so Mrs. Jenner had been right after all in her premisses as well as in her conclusion. It *was* an "enemy" who had pushed poor old Jenner into the drift. But she could not be told that, even though Hilary really believed that she would have found the fact in some queer way a kind of

clearing of her husband's memory.

He ground out the stub of his cigarette, and, settling himself with his hands behind his head, pursued another train of thought. Surely when Denzil returned from abroad matters would come right between him and Chloe! Then he would be again what he used to be—what he really was. And even if there was some truth in what he had let fall yesterday in Windsor Park, he could start to win her afresh. Of course that was what one must hope for.

A knock, and his sister's voice asking if she could come in.

"I say, Rose, this is disgraceful, isn't it? I'm going to get up quite soon, though."

"It's not disgraceful at all," returned she. "Exceedingly sensible. You've been looking dead beat lately. Don't get up until lunch-time, but have a good sleep. I only just came up to have a peep at you. I'll take your tray away."

"No, don't go," said Hilary. "Sit down and let's have a talk. I really have treated you rather badly lately, Rosalind, but I couldn't help myself. Did Denzil tell you anything special when he was here on Friday evening?"

Rosalind, sitting now on the edge of the bed, nodded. "Yes, he did. I was very sorry in one way to hear his news; but in another I was glad. He and Chloe are not suited to each other, and it's a mercy they have found it out in time."

Hilary sighed. "But it's desperately hard lines on Denzil. He hasn't had a fair chance all through. He . . . yes, I can tell you this much, that he had got himself into a dreadful situation—or rather thought he had—enough to put anybody off their balance. Oh, it's all right now, thank God, but it was only last night that the trouble was . . . cleared up. It *is* cleared up, however, and I can't see any

reason why later on the engagement shouldn't come on again."

"You can put that out of your head!" said his sister very decidedly. "There's no chance of that at all. Would you be surprised to hear that I have heard Chloe's own explanation of the break?"

Hilary was surprised. "Chloe's explanation? When?"

"Yesterday afternoon. She rang me up on behalf of Lady Monckton and asked me to go to tea. She, I mean Chloe, asked me to come early, and so while Lady Monckton was still resting upstairs I had a nice talk with her. And do you know what was the first thing she said to me?" Rosalind smiled down at him with satisfaction. "She said, 'I do hope you and Hilary aren't very angry with me for breaking off my engagement.' 'With *me*,' you notice!"

"Oh, she put it like that to save Denzil's face," protested Hilary.

"I don't think so. It seems she had doubts about it from the very beginning . . . just as I had suspected," said Rosalind, still with that pleased expression. "No, she is quite certain that it was a mistake—though she spoke very nicely indeed of Denzil."

"If only she knew what he had been through," said Hilary, giving his pillow a hard thump.

"Up to a point she does," replied Rosalind calmly, "because Denzil, it appears, told her—as some excuse for his recent irritability and discourtesy—that he had had something very grave on his mind. But the engagement is off for good, Hilary, I assure you."

And as Hilary said nothing, she passed him from the breakfast tray the box of cigarettes for which he seemed with one hand to be searching under his pillow, and said,

"What is Denzil going to do?"

"Going abroad, presently. Are the matches there?"

Rosalind struck one, and held it for him. "Chloe sent you a message. She hopes you will go and see her."

Hilary got the cigarette going before he mumbled, "So I will, but not till Denzil has left England."

Rosalind got off the bed and looked down at him. There was something vaguely victorious in her air. "You can't wait for that! She is taking Lady Monckton down to Lincott Manor next Wednesday to convalesce. If you want to be sure of seeing her you had better call this afternoon."

"It's very kind of Chloe," said Hilary in a would be nonchalant manner, "but she can't really want to see me." Here he dropped cigarette ash on to the sheet, but was not reproved for it.

"Unless you wish to leave her with the impression that you don't want to see *her*," said his sister, taking up the breakfast tray, "you'd better go. I think she'll be hurt if you don't." And giving him the look of one who would fain say, "Now you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!" Rosalind Fortescue went from the room.

"He's got a fair field now and no favour," she said to herself as she proceeded down the stairs. "The chief obstacle is that he's far too modest about himself. It's always Denzil first with him. Well, all his life Denzil has only had to stretch out his hand for everything he wanted . . . and perhaps that is why *this* has happened. But I believe I'm going to see Hilary come into his own at last."

By "this" she meant Denzil's loss of Chloe Page, but, though she was ignorant of the fact, her reflection had an even wider application.

The butler at Hans Place might have been a close kins-


man of the stately being at Lincott Manor, and the resemblance brought to Hilary memories of that first visit to Chloe Page, only six weeks ago. It seemed at least six months!

The strangeness of coming to call upon her again without Denzil oppressed him as he mounted Lady Monckton's wide and well carpeted staircase. And Chloe couldn't really want to see him, especially after that scene over the card table on which they had parted. It was only her kind way of putting it to Rosalind. What was the good of this meeting—and in Lady Monckton's presence too?

But when Hilary was announced to a spacious room with gilt chairs and a magnificent cut glass chandelier, no Lady Monckton was visible; in fact the room seemed uninhabited, except by a Pekinese who pranced forward with hauteur to inspect him. Then Hilary saw that it was not empty, for, standing by one of the tall windows, in a green frock, much as she had stood when first he had set eyes on her—save that in this setting she looked smaller, and somehow a little forlorn, was Chloe herself.

As the door closed she came quickly forward, and there was no mistaking the welcome in her voice.

"Oh, Hilary, I'm *so* glad to see you!"



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